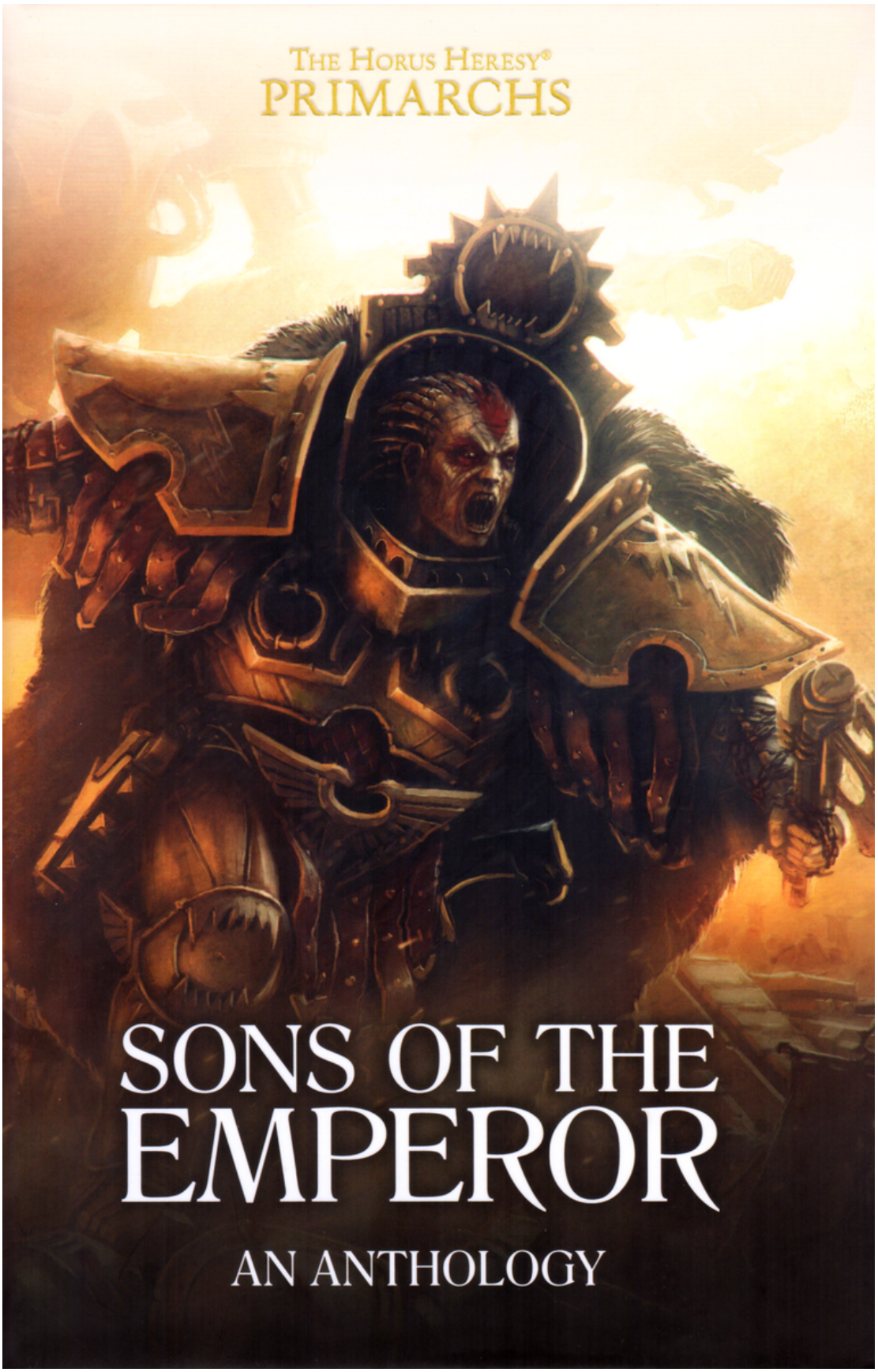
THE HORUS HERESY®
PRIMARCHS

SONS OF THE EMPEROR

AN ANTHOLOGY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BACKLIST

The Primarchs

JAGHATAI KHAN: WARHAWK OF CHOGORIS

FERRUS MANNUS: GORGON OF MEDUSA

FULGRIM: THE PALATINE PHOENIX

LORGAR: BEARER OF THE WORD

PERTURABO: THE HAMMER OF OLYMPIA

MAGNUS THE RED: MASTER OF PROSPERO

LEMAN RUSS: THE GREAT WOLF

ROBOUTE GUILLIMAN: LORD OF ULTRAMAR

More Horus Heresy from Black Library

HORUS RISING

FALSE GODS

GALAXY IN FLAMES

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CONTENTS

Cover
The Passing of Angels – John French
The Abyssal Edge – Aaron Dembski-Bowden
Mercy of the Dragon – Nick Kyme
Shadow of the Past – Gav Thorpe
The Emperor's Architect – Guy Haley
Prince of Blood – L J Goulding
The Ancient Awaits – Graham McNeill
Misbegotten – Dan Abnett
About the Authors
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SONS OF THE EMPEROR
AN ANTHOLOGY

JOHN FRENCH, AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN,
NICK KYME, GAV THORPE, GUY HALEY,
L J GOULDING, GRAHAM McNEILL
& DAN ABNETT

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.
The Age of Darkness has begun.

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THE PASSING OF ANGELS

John French

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'If gods did not exist mankind would conjure them into being.
If god did exist He would will monsters into life and cloak them in the light of heaven.'

- attributed to the Unspeakable King

I do not want to be here. I do not want this present, and I want the future that follows it less. Yet the future is inescapable.

My head is bowed, my eyes closed, and I listen as the present rushes past.

The tick-buzz of armour servos…

Breath vibrating inside the tarnished silver helms of the Host…

Wind gliding across the skin of the Storm Eagle as it drops from the dawn sky…

Fire feathering from the wings…

The wind running amongst the clouds…

And beyond that shell of air - silence…

Silence…

There, beyond the sky, is the only place where it is truly quiet. The song of the spheres is not a sound. It is that silence that sits between earth and moon, that marks the passing of comets, and sings the birth of stars. Heaven - from where the angels of an unenlightened past looked down on creation.

'My lord.' It is Alepheo. I hear the damage in his voice, the old wound to the throat, still healing. I hear the control, and the deference, and beyond that, pain. 'We have reached the drop mark,' he says.

I open my eyes, and the world crowds back in through them, bright and dark and consuming. I see the Host of destruction. I see the scars and burns on their crimson armour. I feel my senses rush to enfold every angle of form, every mutable scrap of colour, every stutter of movement. On and on, each nanosecond a tableau, and each shift of hand or eye causing the universe to shatter and remake itself in my sight.

There is so much in even the smallest moment of life, so much that humans cannot see. My senses pour down through layers of detail. There is tarnish on the tear drops that sit on the cheeks of Alepheo's mask. There are five droplets. The second droplet is a micron out of alignment. The artisan who made it had been disturbed during the sculpting. The interruption had disrupted his equilibrium. It had taken a heartbeat for him to settle back to his task, but in that time the damage to his work had been done. I can see it in the error, and I can feel the flaw in my heart.

I catch myself, and pull my senses back to the level of the beings that stand at my side - my cruel and beautiful children. I read them and their hearts with a glance. So much is written in the way that Alepheo hangs his head, so much more in the way his hand rests on the holster of his pistol. I see the weight of his fears, even though these half-angels know no fear. You cannot cut the core of fear from a human, you can only make them deaf to the screams. And inside, these angels of death - made to bring enlightenment like falling lightning - all are screaming.

'Doors opening.' The pilot's voice echoes in the compartment.

Red lights begin to pulse. Sirens blare. Doors along the flank of the craft slide open. Sound and air rush out into the brightening night. I can see the Storm Eagles, Lightning Crows and Thunderhawks following us down out of the dome of the sky, red streaks in deepening blue. Like drops of blood. Like tears.

I step to the edge of the open assault ramp. The air pulls at me. I look down. The summit of the mountain city rises from dawn-stained cloud. I turn my back, balancing on the edge. Sixty silver faces look at me from the compartment.

'Leave none alive,' I say, and I step back into the rushing air.

Shar-General Galen did not look up from the battle plans as the crowd of officers drained from the strategium. Bright sunlight poured through the

dome above. She could feel the warmth on the back of her neck. She knew the plans by heart, but still she did not look up.

He was still there, on the other side of the planning table. He had not moved. She found it hard to look at him sometimes, even after a decade of war at his side. Part of her did not know what she would see.

'Please, general, ask your question,' the Angel said.

'I am…' She almost looked up at him, but caught herself and began to shuffle sheaves of field reports together. She shook her head, breathed out. 'I am clear on all of the operational elements involved. There is nothing that needs to be clarified.'

'But you have a question, Galen,' he said. His voice was a melody, clear as the note of a struck bell. 'Not all matters of war exist in bullets and orders. Ask what you wish.'

She stopped, her eyes on the parchment under her hands.

'Why did you insist on this?' she said at last, and finally looked at him.

Sanguinius, primarch of the IX Legion, Archangel of Baal, stood in the cold light of the strategium. An ivory white tunic and toga was wound and folded over muscle and smooth skin. Golden hair framed a face set in an expression that spoke of wisdom and understanding. It was a perfect face, a face that called to the ideals of humanity. She met his eyes. His furled wings shifted at his back, and she was suddenly struck by the fact that the feathers were not just white, but every hue of shadow. He was beautiful, more beautiful than life, and more terrifying than anything she had seen in half a century's worth of warzones.

'It must happen,' he said, and she felt the terror and adoration fade from her. 'You were at the assault on the H_____'s settlement. I was not there, and yet I saw it in your words, and in the words you choose not to say.'

Galen felt her eyes twitch as the memory returned…

When the H_____ had detonated the first mine, the gravity for five kilometres around the blast had broken. Even ten kilometres away she had felt herself lift from the ground. Vomit had risen to her tongue. Then she heard the cry of her adjutant, and looked up.

The detonation unfolded in silence, stacking up and up and up to the scuffed blue of the sky. It shimmered like water. She could see through it. Thousands of tiny flecks danced in the expanding column. She blinked. The skin of her face was prickling. Then she realised that the flecks were people:

tens of thousands of troops that she had sent in to the settlement and the hundreds of thousands that lived there. Light bent and folded. Motes of darkness grew and burst like bubbles. And out the silence rolled, as though the sound was swallowed by the atrocity of what she was witnessing. Seconds touched eternity as the column of broken reality touched the dome of the heavens.

Then it collapsed.

Everything within ceased to be.

Air rushed in to the space left. The pressure wave ruptured Galen's eardrums and scattered her command cadre out of their transports.

Where the mine had detonated there was nothing. Just a black wound that hung like mist above the ground, drinking light.

Galen blinked, and the memory vanished into Sanguinius' gaze.

'Even so, my lord, even though the H_____ are willing to use such devices…'

'It is not just the inhumanity of what they have done. Resistance to the truth is a tragedy, but the weapons we choose to fight with speak to eternity. The Emperor has decreed that such weapons will not be tolerated to exist, and their use will earn His wrath.'

'I have said I understand what must be done, my lord, but…'

He bowed his head. She felt her breath stop in her lungs.

There was something in the gesture, something so simple, so human. When he looked up, the pain on his face almost made her cry out.

'I understand too, general.' He reached out and took her hand in both of his. His gaze was still steady on hers, but it seemed to her that shadow had drained into the recesses of his face. 'The question you want to know the answer to is not why I insisted on this, but how I can do such a thing.'

'The weapons we choose to fight with speak to eternity,' she said to him.

He nodded at hearing his own words, but she could see only a hardening in his eyes.

'And I am the creation of the Emperor, Galen. Though I am His son, I was engineered, not born. I am as He made me. I was made to perform a function for mankind.'

'But by doing this, how can we claim to be better than the people we wish to drag into the light?'

'We cannot make that claim.' He half-turned away then. His pupils

vanished as his eyes caught the light streaming from the crystal dome above. 'You and humanity can claim the light that is left after our passing, but I can claim only that I know my nature.' He looked back at her then, his eyes clear. 'And even in the myths of the past, angels were not created for kindness.'

I am falling through the light of a new-born day alone. Behind me the Host of destruction falls with me. Clouds whip past. The mountain city grows beneath us, fog peeling back from its flanks. I can see tiers of buildings set behind curtain walls. I can see roads, and people moving in the last shadows of night. The lights of domed force-fields glitter as the fog passes through them. The guns on the high towers do not turn to greet us. We are too few and too small for their machine systems to notice. Those that set them to watch the skies have made the mistake that ancient kings made before their realms burned for pride - they forget the oldest lessons.

The first gunship comes into view high above us. The tower guns see it. Barrels sweep up. Energy flushes into charge chambers. Calculations race through silica.

We fall on, and the city rises.

The guns fire. Columns of blinding light rise into the sky, burning cloud banks away. The air shrieks. The gunship corkscrews through the burning energy.

I can see the force-field beneath us, a glittering skin. There are figures on the roads and ramparts looking up, and one of them raises a hand and points. I spread my wings, the dew-heavy air catching in the feathers. Above me, my sons trigger their jump packs. Fire cuts their fall just as we touch the force-field dome and pass through.

Above us the air is burning; beneath us the waking city sees us. My wings are spread, and my spear is raised in my hand. I can see the condemned. I can see their faces. I can see the terror in the face of a soldier as he steps into the light beside his squad. I can see his eyes. I can see that he was not a soldier until the coming of war. I can see that he has killed. I can see his fear of death and his cruelty in the tremble of his rising gun. I can see his love of life in the eye behind the gun. I can see all humanity in that look. The tip of my spear strikes him in the middle of the forehead.

The first blood of this reaping sprays up to fleck the beat of my wings as I

land.

Alepheo, commander of the Second Seraphic Host of the IX Legion, held his breath and counted. As he felt the time seep into his muscles, he lifted the brush. Its tip was black, heavy with soot ink. He had ground the pigment himself using charcoal that he had made from a single tree he had felled in the forest of Macragge during his time amongst the XIII. The handle of the brush was bone, in this case human. Hollow-cored, it was light and perfectly balanced when the bristles were loaded with the correct amount of ink. The bone had been his birth brother's, given to him after the last of his kin fell in the trials to become one of the Angels.

He smiled as the sorrow of that memory touched his thoughts. He let it settle, feeling it combine with the subject he had chosen. A paper scroll hung in front of him as white as fresh snow, seeming to glow in the dusk light entering his chamber from the high windows. The ruined fortress they had taken for their base in the compliance of the H_____ was filled with shadows and marked with the scars of forgotten wars, but here in the high central tower there was light.

The tip of the brush touched the paper. Alepheo paused a second and then his thoughts unfolded through his nerves and muscles. The brush slid over the surface of the paper, leaving a black trail. Now it was in motion, it did not stop. The flow of strokes followed a rhythm set by the beating of his hearts and the song of his thoughts. The dipping of the brush, the flick and flow of ink, the smell of it as it dried, all were the rhythm of creation.

When he was done, he stepped back and looked at what his soul had brought into being.

' "And by my being is desolation wrought," ' said a voice from behind him. ' "And by the shadow of my sword does dew fall and the sun rise" - the Harabic scholars of the past would wonder at such an evocation of their tongue and art.' Alepheo turned and knelt in a single movement. His black robes rustling the brush still in his hand.

'My lord,' he said.

'Rise,' said Sanguinius. 'You must clean that brush before the ink clots the bristles.'

Alepheo obeyed, moving the brush between seven stone bowls of water and drying it with the cloths he had folded and set beside them. Sanguinius took

a single step forwards, eyes fixed on the calligraphic poem spiralling across the paper screen.

'Dead languages speak more clearly than the voices of the living don't you think?'

'Are they dead if some still speak them?' asked Alepheo, dabbing the brush head on the soft black fabric of the second cloth. 'A song sung is still a song even if it has not sounded for millennia.'

'Quite so, my son,' said Sanguinius, and lapsed into silence as Alepheo returned the clean brush to its stand.

'How may I serve, lord?' said Alepheo, turning back to his primarch.

'I have given the order - the H_____ are to be decimated. The population once compliant will be scattered across the Imperium. Others will come and make new cities under this sun. But they and all they have made here will cease to be. Their name will be obliterated, their cities levelled.'

Alepheo was still for a second and then nodded once.

'It was written as soon as they used such weapons.'

Sanguinius' eyes moved over the black words painted onto the paper screen.

'The judgement decreed requires more,' he said.

Alepheo was very still, and then turned to the bowls of water used to clean his brush. He began to pour them into a rough clay jug. Black ink swirled in the splash.

'We must all bear the burden of our nature,' said Alepheo, without looking up as he poured ink and water from the sixth bowl.

'We must. It is a terrible thing to be the bearer of the wrath of an enlightened age.'

Alepheo looked around as he heard a soft clink of something metal being set down on the stone floor.

A helmet lay at Sanguinius' feet. A serene face moulded in tarnished silver looked up at Alepheo with empty eyes. Tear drops marked its cheeks and a rayed halo ran across its crown. It was a death mask, made by a dying brother of the Legion in the last hours of his life and then cast in silver. They were worn only by those called to put aside their names and serve amongst the Legion's Destroyers. To hide one's face behind such a mask was to take on the burden of atrocity, a necessary evil in an age both of

enlightenment and war. It was a burden shared by all the Legion, to be taken up and then put aside when all was done.

'I would call you to be the Dominion of the Destroyer Host,' said Sanguinius.

Alepheo looked at the helm but did not pick it up. The seventh bowl of water was still in his hands. The surface of the liquid within was mirror smooth.

'Of course, my lord,' he said, aware of the control in his voice.

'You will not be yourself in this, my son. You will be your function. Alepheo dies for the time when your hands do this deed.'

'But you are always yourself, my lord. If I must be a part of this why am I granted the absolution of anonymity when you are not?'

Pain ghosted across the Angel's face as he smiled, the expression equal parts affection and sorrow.

'You were all made from humanity, my son. I am not. The darkness that we must bring is not something I can put aside. It is me. In the shadow of my wings life withers and blood salts the ground.'

Alepheo bowed his head, and knelt to pick up the silver helm.

Then he stood, the bowl of black-stained water still held in his other hand.

'I will become death,' he said, and poured the seventh bowl onto the stone floor.

My sons descend around me. Grenades scatter from them like seeds. Phosphex ignites, burning white as it flares and eats the stones of buildings. Radiation grenades land, and rest silent amongst the spreading flames. They will not kill now. They will linger here, the shadow of our passing.

Troops pour from towers. Light shatters from the angles of their black glass armour. One of my sons lands on a tower top. The launcher slung under his arms roars, the radiation missile bursting amongst a dense cluster of soldiers. I can taste the uranium and barium as it salts the air.

A buzzing clank echoes up the streets. I turn, knowing what I will see. The H _____ have kept many wonders from the ages before Old Night, but have also preserved many of its horrors. The things that stalk over the stone and steel road are black mirror-skinned, beetle-carapaced, and skitter on seven legs. Eyes held in crystal capsules stud their abdomens. Human eyes, lidless, blood-shot and rolling. These creations were punishment for the

crimes of dissent or treachery against the monarchs of the H_____. Each one is a family stripped of flesh and remade. Brothers, mothers, sisters and fathers - their nerves, mutilated brains and sense organs spliced into a single cyborg frame. At their core is blind rage and confusion, and lethal purpose.

I look into the eye clusters of the nearest one as it races up the road. A blur of needle-fine rounds sprays from its weapon pod. My wings raise me into the air. It looks up at me, guns and blood-shot eyes tracking as I rise. I throw my spear. It strikes the first abomination and lightning rips through it. Shards of black glass armour, chrome and flesh scatter out. For a second the reek of static blots out the smell of the burning city. I land on top of the dead thing as it collapses, pull the spear free and am striking the second and the third cyborgs without pause, spinning and bounding through the air.

Above me, I see the shield pylons topple from the summit of the mountain city. The skin of its energy shields blinks out of being in a boom of dry thunder. The gunships and fighter bombers come out of the cloud layer an instant later. They loose their payloads. Inferno bombs, phosphex cylinders and radiation missiles burst amongst the tiers of already burning buildings. The heat lights the edge of my wings. Through and above it, my sons, my destroying angels move, silver-faced, armour darkening with soot, firing at anything that moves.

A human is in front of me, gun rising, and then ceases to be as I strike and I am not stopping. I am amongst the throng that pours into the streets, picking men up and casting them down to burn, splitting armour, turning, piercing, slicing. And I do not hesitate. I do not pause in thought or consideration. The condemned run from me burning, blind as their eyes boil. I release them from life as I pass. I do not even feel the spear strikes. Gunfire rips from buildings to tatter my wings. Blood marks my passing, scattering from the slaughter. I am not alive. I am not a creature that lives. I am just judgement I am death. And for now I feel no sorrow.

Horus Lupercal, primarch of the XVI Legion, smiled as his brother stepped through the door. He was unarmoured, his grey-white battleplate shed, hanging from a rack at the chamber's edge. In place of armour, he wore a tunic of plain black. The room was small and bare, and the light of the single glow globe did not reach into its corners. The audience and command chambers of the Vengeful Spirit *could have swallowed it many*

times over, but it was here, in a space that a mortal human could cross in ten strides that the two brothers had chosen to meet.

'You are late,' said Horus, without rising.

'I am,' said Sanguinius, glancing over the chamber's sparse furnishing: a low table set with a game board and two metal stools. 'But I did not want to deprive you of the opportunity to point it out.' He looked at his brother, his face emotionless. 'So, I did not hurry.'

Horus laughed. Sanguinius smiled and sat. He wore a black and red robe, tied at his waist by a golden cord. His wings were tucked tight against his back, and he had cropped his golden hair close so that he seemed the image of ancient heroes given life. He picked up the clay cup from beside the board and took a mouthful. Horus watched his brother as Sanguinius nodded slowly, looking down into the dark liquid in the cup.

'If I did not know better, I would suspect that you went to considerable trouble to find something that tastes this bad.'

Horus took a swig from his own cup, paused, and frowned.

'You are wrong…' He took another swig. 'I did not go to much trouble.' He winced and then began to laugh again. 'But it does taste truly terrible.' He gestured at the board set out between them. Tall pieces carved from blood ivory and ebony sat on hexagons of mother-of-pearl and jet. 'Something new that might entertain, it is—'

'A variant of Ullatur played by the scholar caste of the Noonreach cluster, in form similar to its Terran forebears but with the addition of two pieces - the Messenger, and the Fiend.' Sanguinius picked up one of the blood ivory pieces and turned it in his fingers, letting light play over the three fanged heads sprouting from its top. 'These were made by the blind master Heydosia after she lost her sight.' He put the piece down on a different space to the one he had picked it up from. 'Your move.'

Horus raised an eyebrow.

Sanguinius blinked slowly. 'It is all right, brother. In this variant, going first is considered a disadvantage.' He took a swig from his cup.

'I know,' said Horus, and moved a black raven to take a red crone. He placed the piece next to his cup. 'It's just good that you think you can give me an advantage and win.'

'Oh, I know I can win, brother - I just like watching you think you can win too.'

Horus did not reply, and the sound in the chamber faded to the distant rumble of the Vengeful Spirit's *engines pushing it through the void. The walls vibrated, the note just enough to send ripples across the surface of the two cups of wine.*

'You are troubled,' said Horus at last. Sanguinius' eyes flicked up from the board. A frown creased the perfection of his face.

'As are you,' said the Angel, taking two pieces one after another, the base of his messenger tapping the board as it jumped from kill to kill.

'True,' said Horus, switching the positions of his light bearers and knights. 'But I asked first.' Sanguinius sat back. His wings twitched. 'The old question?' said Horus.

Sanguinius nodded.

'The paradox of our existence,' said Horus, looking back to the board. 'It is not a paradox, though - it is simply a fact. We exist to destroy and by doing so we create.'

'And what of that we must destroy?' asked Sanguinius.

'Tragedies, necessities, sacrifices - everything that shall come shall be greater than anything that is lost.'

Silence slid back into the space as pieces clicked across the polished wood and seashell.

'And you, my brother?' said Sanguinius. 'Your star shines brighter and brighter. Your sons honour you by rising to be exemplars to all. Our father calls you to his side in war and council more than any other…' Horus' gaze was fixed on the board. He reached out and placed a finger on a black prince. 'And yet you are troubled.' Horus looked up, his gaze dark and hard for an instant, and then he shook his head.

'I am not troubled. Questions are part of understanding, part of wisdom.'

'And if they go unanswered?' said Sanguinius. 'I can see it, Horus. I can feel it. You are letting something small feed on the silence inside you.'

Horus moved the prince, but kept his finger on its carved head.

'We are creating a future. We are making it with blood and ideas and symbols and words. The blood is ours and we are the symbols. But the ideas? Has our father ever spoken of the future to you?'

'Many times, and many more times to you.'

'He has spoken of ideas of both unity and humanity in grand terms, but has he ever said what will happen between the bloody present and that golden

time?'

Sanguinius' frown sent shadows across his face.

'To think of such things does nothing good, brother.'

Horus smiled.

'Surgeon, heal thyself.'

Sanguinius' expression did not change.

'The present is far from complete, Horus, and the future will hold many sorrows and many honours. The stars remain wild and unconquered.'

Horus held his brother's gaze for a second, and then shrugged.

'What happens after that? What happens to angels after a new heaven is made?'

Horus gripped the black prince and moved it. The angel looked at the play, and toppled his red king onto its side.

'Shall we play again?' asked Horus.

Sanguinius smiled, his frown clearing like clouds from the face of the sun.

'By all means - I think you might even be getting better.'

I stand on the topmost tower of the mountain city. The heat of the flames is crawling into the bare flesh of my face. Soot marks my features. My hair has burned to my scalp, and the gold of my armour is black with the touch of fire and blood. My cheeks are blistered by radiation and charred by the fire I have passed through. It will heal in the time it takes me to return to my ship in orbit, but for now I do not look like an angel of light and beauty - I am the angel of ruin, whose passing makes the sleeping wake in terror.

Alepheo drops into the ruins beneath me. His red armour is scarred and flame darkened. He looks up at me with a dead silver face that is shedding eternal tears.

'It is done,' he says. I can hear the weight in the words. He will bear the scar of this in his dreams, and it will creep into the poems he paints in the languages of the dead. He will understand then that we are angels. Beauty does not belong to us; it is what we must burn to be what we are.

Beneath us in the city, the stones of the buildings have begun to melt in the sea of fire.

I look up. Beyond the pall of smoke, the clouds are clearing to greet the dawn. The sun touches my eyes. 'Yes,' I say. 'It is done.'

And then I stretch my wings and take to the air, rising from flames and

atrocity towards the light of the future.

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THE ABBYSAL EDGE

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

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I

'Whatever the officers of the Eighth Legion are recording in their own archives at this moment is a matter for their own black consciences. I am a legionary of the Thousand Sons. I deal only in truth.'

II

'Part of me wonders if my primarch will soften his own accounting so as not to speak ill of his brother, the barbarian Curze. I do not believe for a moment he will be anything but honest, but honesty can be naked, or it can be dressed in veils of mercy. Lord Magnus is a forgiving man - wise, where his brother is spiteful. Beneficent, where Curze is bitter.'

III

'The Devastation of Zoah marks only the second time I have stood by my primarch's side in battle. I am not blind to the honour done to me during this compliance, when I was in the presence of not one but two of the Emperor's sons. Nor am I blind to the mistakes made that led to the campaign's catastrophic failure.

I seek not to shift blame according to subjective whim. I intend instead to assign fault, objectively and thoroughly, where it belongs. The Night Lords have already disengaged, leaving us alone. Doubtless they go to take their moronic viciousness elsewhere, parading their ignorance as the ultimate virtue, claiming they did only what had to be done.'

IV

'And so it comes to be that we stand here in the ashes, sifting through the powdery remains of revelation. It is too late to change a thing. Too late to do anything but mourn what was lost.

Everything is gone. All is dust.'

Ulatal lowered the data-slate. For a time there was silence, or at least something close to it. The sound of his own laboured breathing was wet and tidal, punctuated by occasional draws on his aspirator. Beyond the gentle, unhealthy sounds of his own continuing life, the chamber had fallen entirely quiet.

'What do I do with this?' He tossed the data-slate onto his work desk, feeling the fluid in his respiratory tract shift as he leaned forward. Ulatal was more than a little weary of that liquid gurgle in his chest.

'Forgive me,' said the servitor standing in the corner. 'I am having trouble parsing your query. To what are you referring?'

Ulatal looked over at the dead-eyed, monotone creature, and waved a hand in the vague direction of the data-slate.

'This. What exactly am I supposed to do with this?'

'Forgive me, I am having trouble parsing your query. You appear to have indicated the chamber wall. Is this accurate?'

Ulatal resisted the urge to scream. Instead he jabbed his finger against the data-slate's screen, hammering it half a dozen times with his fingertip. 'No, you piece of… This. *This*. The report. What do I do with the report?'

The servitor didn't move, didn't even blink. 'Reports are to be organised, notarised and filed for pre-archival secondary processing.'

'Why did they assign you to me?' This wasn't the first time Ulatal had asked the question. 'You're as much use as a rock in a game of regicide. How do I deal with a report like this?'

'Reports are to be organised, notarised and filed for secondary processing.'

'Shut up,' Ulatal said with dangerous calm.

'Compliance,' the servitor replied obediently, and entered silent running.

'And if you speak again in the next day cycle, I'll shoot you. That's not just a promise, it's a solemn vow.'

He could do it, too. They'd not taken his sidearm away. Admittedly, he was

never likely to use it in an occupational capacity again, but its familiar weight on his hip did a little to counterbalance the feeling of helplessness from the bloody fluid in his lungs and guts.

The servitor stared at him, caught between conflicting imperatives. 'I must remind you that destruction of Expeditionary Fleet resources and materiel is prohibited under the codes of cond—'

A needle-thin beam of concentrated energy speared through the servitor's chest. There was no dramatic impact, no bodily momentum crashing the cyborg back against the wall, just a scorched hole about the size of a thumbnail directly through the servitor's heart. It tried valiantly (or irritatingly, from Ulatal's perspective) to finish its sentence, then slumped down where it had stood. The bionic plate of its skull clanked almost tenderly back against the wall.

Ulatal lowered the laspistol, cursing softly. Another thing the damn crash had taken from him: he'd been aiming for the bastard's head.

Annoyed, and using that annoyance to mask his unease, he holstered his sidearm and rubbed his temples.

'Now shut up,' he said to the twitching servitor.

It said, 'Compliance…' on the third attempt. Then with blood bubbling from its mouth, the servitor obeyed its final order.

Perdita came to see him later that day. A maintenance crew had cleaned the servitor away by the time she arrived. Ulatal's gaze flicked to where Perdita wore her new rank insignia on her shoulders and chest - and damn if that didn't hurt a little. She picked her way through the tumbledown chaos of his chamber, glancing at the las-burn scorch in the wall.

'Don't,' Ulatal warned her. 'Maintenance already lectured me.' He gave a nasty little smile that only lifted one side of his face. 'I told them it was an accidental weapon discharge.'

'I wasn't going to say a word, sir.' After a moment, she wrinkled her nose. 'Except that it smells like something died in here.'

Ulatal took that judgement in the spirit it was intended. Bathing hadn't been all that high on his priorities since the crash. Bathing took three times longer than it used to, and hurt an order of magnitude above that. He could've taken the nerve-suppressors allotted to him by the medicae, but they left him dazed and exhausted.

'It's not *sir* any more,' he pointed out.

She could have flinched at his bladed tone, and he was surprised she didn't. It probably would've been better if she had; then he'd have been spared the gentleness in her reply.

'It will always be sir,' she said.

'Don't patronise me, Dita.' Ulatal practically grunted the words. 'How's the squadron?'

'Adjusting. Did you see we're flying fleet patrol again?'

Of course he'd seen. She was still sending him the bloody duty roster every week. He didn't know how he felt about that. Was it charity? Sympathy? Pity?

He nodded to her question, not trusting his voice for a moment. Perdita straightened her uniform as she looked around the room again, not meeting his eyes. Throne, if Dita was coming in here and looking awkward, things really were bad.

'You forgot to say I'm looking better,' he goaded her.

As easily as that, the tension vanished. She grinned. 'You look no different from a week ago.'

'Yeah, I'm a prince these days. I hear they're going to put my face on the two-credit coin.'

She stood at sudden attention. 'Permission to lie, sir.'

Now that was more like it. Ulatal found himself smiling too. 'Permission denied, commander.'

'Yes, sir. Then it's with regret that I inform you that you look like shit, sir.'

Ulatal chuckled. The slime in his lungs and guts chuckled with him, and he could've lived without that, but it still felt good to laugh.

'At ease, commander.'

Perdita stood at ease, then wordlessly used the edge of her boot to scuff some of his smallclothes under the bed. In her eyes, he read the disapproval she was too polite to speak aloud. His officer's quarters, once so ordered and pristine, were becoming a little… domestic.

'So why am I here?' she asked.

'Because I need a new archival servitor. The last one died in an accidental weapons discharge.'

She raised an eyebrow and hiked a thumb at the door. 'I can just leave, you know.'

Ulatal smoothed his palm down his unshaven face and, with the awkward gait of the newly-mutilated, he limped forwards on the bionic limb that replaced his lost leg. He had to suck on his aspirator, and after *that* wonderful indignity, what was left of his face twisted into a half smile amidst the burn scarring.

'You're here because I think I'm in trouble, Dita.' He handed her the data-slate. 'Look at this.'

About halfway through, the colour drained from her face. By the time she lowered the data-slate, disbelief was fighting with discomfort for control of her expression.

'Is this real?' she asked.

Ulatal thumbed a code into his workstation, bringing up a hololithic display of a world with three moons, ringed by icons depicting two battlefleets.

'This is Zoah, and… whatever its bloody moons are called. And this is the 3,283rd Expeditionary Fleet. It's broken up now. It wasn't a true Expeditionary Fleet at all, just another ad hoc armada forming when two Imperial fleets find their spheres of conquest overlapping.'

He gestured to two of the icons, lighting them on the display and bolding their names. The first read *Photep*. The second, *Nightfall*. The flagships of the XV and VIII Legiones Astartes.

'At Zoah, the unified host resulted in not just two legions being forced to work together, but two primarchs.'

She handed the data-slate back to him. He took it, though he didn't want to. Neither of them seemed to want to hold it for long. 'So Zoah is real,' Perdita ventured, 'but what about the veracity of the events in the report?'

Ulatal raised a finger, a teacher making a point. 'That's the question.'

Perdita was watching him with an expression he couldn't quite read. The ambiguity surprised him, given how long they'd flown together.

'What? Why are you looking at me like that?'

'Did you ask for this assignment, sir? Or did they give it to you?'

Ulatal snorted. 'I didn't want to be removed from active service while I convalesced. I think they agreed because they were scared that if I had too much time to think, I'd swallow a round from my sidearm. If you're asking whether I specifically asked for archive oversight duty, then no. I just

wanted something to do.'

He gestured around the chamber, in all its sparse grandeur. 'What amazes me is that there are ranking Crusade officers who spend their lives overseeing this work.'

Perdita fixed him with a disapproving glare. 'It's a vital duty. This work is integral to the Great Crusade. To humanity itself. These are the records future generations will read, learning how we conquered the stars.'

How grand. Ulatal's inner voice was slick and sly with the thought. *How very grand that sounds.*

'It's a dull duty, Dita.' He grunted something that was almost a laugh. 'At least, it was until I got a report saying two primarchs now despise each other. None of the other missions I've archived were anything like this.'

'I don't understand you, sir. You're diminishing the work with one breath, and fixated upon it with the next. You're shaking with unspent energy.'

'I notice you're delicately avoiding the word *obsession*.'

Her smile was a thin, sympathetic slice that softened her eyes. 'You said it, not me. So… what are you going to do?'

Ulatal dragged in a breath through his aspirator. 'I don't know. I can't find anything like it anywhere else. And how does one follow up this Thousand Sons legionary's ramblings? I'd need to go to the flagship and speak with the *Nightfall's* archivists, but that's no guarantee of getting the truth.'

'You suspect a cover-up?'

Did he? Did he, honestly? 'I suspect *something* went on out there, something between the two primarchs, and they don't want any of the little people knowing about it. This legionary broke ranks and filed his report out of… I don't know. Vanity, perhaps. Superiority. Like he had something to prove.'

Having Dita here was good. He was barely even talking to her now, but her presence let him work the problem through out loud, from another angle.

And she knew it, too. She knew him well enough to know how he worked.

'Sir?' she prompted.

'I have the authority to investigate, but…'

He let the words hang. Perdita didn't take them up in agreement, which he'd been hoping for.

'And?' she asked. The woman was merciless when she wanted to be.

'And I should. I need to. It's my duty.' Saying it out loud plascreted it into reality. 'It's my duty. I was hoping you'd talk me out of it. Maybe even suggesting the file could've got lost or corrupted along the way.'

Perdita retightened her already immaculate ponytail. When she moved, Ulatal couldn't help but notice her brass rank insignia pins again, flashing as they reflected the light from the overhead lumes.

'Would you listen to me if I tried to talk you out of it?' She looked him dead in the eyes. 'Honestly, sir?'

He didn't reply, which was itself an answer.

Perdita wasn't blind. Ulatal knew she recognised the threat of fixation in her commander's behaviour: the feverish need to see this through to the end. She'd seen it before. They all had, at one time or another - that need for a warrior to achieve *something* in the wake of going down in flames and crawling back up from the rubble.

She gambled in the silence that followed. 'The Remembrancers have taken hold of pict-footage from the Juuvaur engagement.'

Ulatal's throat worked. He tried and failed to swallow, hoping against hope he was keeping his emotions from his unshaven face. 'How?'

'How does classified military intelligence always hit the public eye, sir? Someone leaked it.' She took a breath before speaking more. 'They're calling you a hero. 'They're writing poems about it, painting impressions… It's already spread to other fleets.'

He snorted, resisting a pull on his aspirator. Let his last lung clench up. Let it shrivel in his scarred chest, for all that it mattered. Anything to stop Dita sensing the thrill of fearful discomfort snaking its way down Ulatal's spinal column.

'Idiots,' he said.

'Sir, no. No. You *are* a hero. That fight was…'

She kept talking but Ulatal was no longer listening. He stared at her, his guts aching at the thought of all those ludicrous chroniclers and poets and artists watching him, watching his final mission, watching the fight itself, watching the way it ended in blood and choking smoke and shrieking engines and blood and burning iron and blood, so much blood and—

Ulatal opened his eyes, unsure of just when he'd closed them. He limped back to his chair, hating the instinctive exhalation of relief when he took his weight off his abused hip. Perdita politely pretended not to notice.

'It suits you,' Ulatal said at last.

'Sir?'

'My rank. You wear it well and we both knew it was coming. At least this way I didn't have to lose you to another squadron when they promoted you.'

Perdita smiled. 'Is this the part where you tell me I'm the best pilot you've ever known and that you're ever so proud of me?'

'Throne, no. *I* was the best. But you were a decent wingmate.'

'You'll be back with us—'

Ulatal raised a hand. 'Spare me the groxshit, please. My flying days are done, unless they rig up my next cockpit with a seat to counterbalance all the nausea from my broken skull, and an irrigation system to handle the fact I seem to crap blood now. Throne, half my organs are synthetic clone-copies that barely function. If they cybernetically replaced everything that was wrong with me, I'd be a servitor.' He showed his new metal teeth to illustrate the point.

'Perhaps they'll give you a ship. A frigate to command.'

He felt a moment of genuine horror filter into his ever-present irritation. 'I'm a starfighter pilot. I don't want a bloody ship, wallowing in the void with its fat arse hanging out.' Ulatal trailed off, hearing the petulance in his own voice. 'Although… a battleship, maybe? One of the big Glorianas. That might be fun.'

Perdita laughed, and it was music to her former commander's ears. No charity or sympathy in that laugh. None in her eyes, either.

'Aim high, sir,' she said with a grin. 'So, when do you leave?'

Ulatal rocked in his restraint throne, doing his best not to grunt in pain each time the ship buckled around him. The first moment he'd felt the engines engage and shunt the vessel forwards, all of his injuries awoke at once, determined to punish him for taking this little trip. The supply transport pulled none of the high-grav manoeuvres he'd spent a life acclimating to in the cockpit of his Rage-pattern fighter, but it was still anything but a smooth ride. The cargo-hauler felt like it rattled its way through the warp, held together more by luck than by skilled piloting or a decent hull.

Few military vessels were en route anywhere near where he needed to go. That meant he'd needed to be creative. Three weeks transit on a resupply carrier here, a month-long warp jump on a pilgrim ship there… Through a

mix of decent planning and good fortune, Ulatal had managed to make it to the final leg of his journey.

None of the ships had been much fun for his weakened constitution, but this one was the worst yet. At a particularly nasty shudder, his pained grunt melted into a teeth-clenching groan. Several of the other passengers cast a glance his way. He licked the acid taste of nausea off the back of his teeth and swallowed, too irritated to be embarrassed.

Every time he breathed in, he inhaled the sweat-stink of the other passengers. Every time he moved, he felt their eyes on him. The uneasy glances were fine; he could take those as they came. It was the looks of pity that knifed at him. The sympathetic, half-scared gazes of lifelong civilians seeing a warrior brought low.

Well, there was nothing he could do about it now, apart from not throwing up in front of them. He'd certainly not be marching in any victory parades any time soon.

'Are you all right?'

Ulatal lifted his head to the man in the restraint throne across the thoroughfare. He drew breath to reply, and managed three words before his breakfast rations and chunks of stomach lining blasted against the cage of his clenched teeth. Ulatal sagged against his restraint buckles, and when he moaned he painted the gantry floor with vomit. Groans and curses sounded out around him.

'Yeah,' he panted, head down, staring at the floor between his knees. 'Never better.'

* * *

Ulatal was in no fit state to spend too long gazing out of portholes as they glided in to dock, but he still spared himself a smile at the sight of all that void plating cast in dirty cobalt and tarnished bronze against the endless black. She was filthy from her journeys and bloodied from battle, but the *Nightfall* wasn't without her charms. If she ran out her guns, she was capable of levelling cities in minutes, and killing worlds within hours.

Disembarking took place without a hitch, and the fleet liaison had assigned him quarters. Better quarters than his own back aboard the *Serpent of the Black Seas*, which was a surprise. The liaison had known he was coming, of

course. He'd followed protocol and sent word ahead of his arrival. No sense making a bad first impression.

'Wing Commander Orthos Ulatal, assigned to the Eighth legion, seconded to Crusade Battlefleet Archival Resources. Thank you for coming. I'd like to speak to one of your ranking Legion archivists,' he'd said to the portly, officious fellow duty-bound to welcome him aboard. 'At his earliest opportunity.'

The liaison was of Nostramo, his skin the near-albino of the bulk of that world's unhealthy population. He spoke Gothic with the mellow flair typical of the Night Lords themselves, and kept to the common tongue of the Imperium despite the fact Ulatal spoke several Nostraman dialects as fluently as any native.

'I will do what I can,' the liaison replied.

'This is important,' Ulatal stressed in the face of the other man's placidity.

'As I said, sir, I'll do what I can.'

Ulatal winced as he leaned forward to unlace his boots, and something wetly unpleasant slipped in his healing guts. 'You don't sound confident,' he pointed out. 'I've served the Eighth Legion for almost two decades, my friend. I know what Space Marine officers can be like. You don't need to be delicate about this. I trust what you're trying not to say is that your overseers are standoffish bastards?'

The liaison cleared his throat, seeking the right balance of truth and diplomacy. 'Well, they rarely fraternise with mortal crew—'

'Listen to me,' Ulatal interrupted, looking down at his data-slate again and reading through the info-spillage. 'I just need to speak to one of the flagship's archivists. Not the bloody primarch himself, nor even any of the officers. Just an archivist.'

The liaison hesitated, then gave a crisp salute. 'I think that can be arranged, sir.'

It took three days to get an answer. The liaison didn't return. When Ulatal contacted him through his quarters' crew terminal, the replies ranged from evasive to placating, always smooth, never mired by awkwardness. The last time Ulatal reached out, he was politely rebuffed by a servitor, who informed him in a monotone drawl that he should remain in his chambers and await the arrival of someone who would be able to help with his

investigation.

'I can't help but think your phrasing is a little suspicious,' Ulatal replied to the lobotomised cyborg on the other end of the link. Instinct had him check his sidearm after the vox-call ended.

The warrior that pounded a fist against Ulatal's door had come armed and armoured. The legionary towered above Ulatal, who was a tall man himself, standing clad in the brass-edged midnight ceramite of the VIII Legion. Standing this close to a Legiones Astartes warrior was never a comfortable experience, even for those used to the sheer size of them. This one, this *close*, was a revelation of immensity. In one of its hands, it held a chain-bladed glaive with a haft over three metres long. In its other hand, it held a snarling skull helmet crested with twin wings. The active power generator on the Space Marine's back made Ulatal's gums itch. He had to resist the unpleasant urge to rub his eyes; they felt like they were vibrating in their sockets.

Ulatal knew who it was. He'd seen the warrior's image in countless Imperial inspirational holos relaying the deeds of Legiones Astartes heroes. He'd seen the armoured giant in almost as many classified post-mission picts, describing the VIII Legion's many victories over the last century.

The Night Lord stared down, his inhuman eyes offering a gaze of passionless, unblinking blackness. When he spoke, his voice was the sound of an avalanche somehow given the power to sneer.

'Greetings,' said First Captain Jago Sevatarion. 'You and I are going to have a conversation.'

For the first few minutes, Ulatal was quite convinced he was going to die with each movement the warrior made. He was no coward. No one could rise to his rank and win the wars he'd won if cowardice ran through their veins, yet he flinched each rime Sevatarion's armour joints snarled at the merest motion. His guts physically clenched when the warrior dropped his war spear on the table with a resounding crash. As spacious as his quarters were, the Space Marine officer took up a threatening span.

When the feeling of imminent death faded, it didn't retreat far. Instead it was replaced by a certainty that he wouldn't leave the room alive once his story was told. The idea of drawing his sidearm for protection was a cold and hilarious comfort; using his service laspistol on the first captain of the

VIII Legion would be no more effective than throwing rocks at a Land Raider.

He'd offered the Space Marine a cup of tea from his hospitality supplies, and First Captain Sevatarion had smiled, charmed by the offer, amused by it, or doing his best to mimic politeness.

'No. Now start talking.'

With those words, and the order within them, business had begun in earnest. Both men had sat - one with the grunt of his wounds troubling him, the other with the powered growls of his armour joints adapting to the change in posture. Ulatal handed over a data-slate with the transcribed report and relevant hololithic data. Then all he could do was wait. He sat there while the Night Lord finished reading, doing his best not to cough or clutch his pained stomach. The last thing he wanted was for the warrior to mistake his sickness for nervousness.

Sevatarion's features were pale above his armour's ceramite collar, the pallid flesh so typical of all Nostraman-born souls. His black eyes flickered as he read. At one point he ran his gauntleted fingertips through the widow's peak of his black hair. At another point, his lip-curling sneer melted into a dry chuckle.

A Space Marine's cognition was a thing of transhuman processes. When Ulatal had shown the text to Perdita, it had taken her almost an hour to read it all. Sevatarion finished reviewing it in less than six minutes.

The warrior didn't give back the data-slate once he was done with it. He locked eyes with Ulatal from across the chamber's low table. 'You're looking at me as though you expect me to kill you.'

Ulatal gave a cautious smile. 'The thought had crossed my mind.'

Sevatarion kept his eyes on the human as he nodded down at the data-slate still in his hand. 'Because of this?'

Careful, careful.

'With all due respect, lord…'

' "Sevatar" is fine, in this circumstance. Leave the "lord" elsewhere, please. I am not a king.'

'With respect… Your reputation isn't one of patience and mercy.'

Sevatar stared back at him, unblinking, unmoving. A servitor would have shown more emotion.

'I feel that's an unfair judgement of my character,' the warrior said,

perfectly calm. 'Your words grieve me. I'm deeply aggrieved.'

Silence reigned. *Is… is he joking? Is this a jest?*

Ulatal cleared his throat and drew breath to speak, but Sevatar interrupted him. 'There is hardly enough information here to be worth butchering you over. This is only a fraction of the story.'

Ulatal leaned forward, feeling the looseness inside his chest and guts squirm in ways he'd rather not have considered. 'I came for the truth, first captain.'

Sevatar met his gaze without blinking. He stared: judging, considering. 'You chase revelation with the fire of fever in your eyes, Orthos Ulatal. But such flames char a man's soul.'

'This is my duty. That's all there is to it.'

Sevatar's lip curled in some flavour of amused disgust. 'Is it indeed. I saw the gun-picter footage of your crash, by the way. The impact should have killed you three times over. You're a lucky man.'

Praise was the last thing he had expected. 'I… thank you, first captain.'

'Although you look like you were sewn back together with body parts from half a dozen men. Were you an attractive fellow before the crash, Ulatal?'

The officer hesitated again. He could feel this confrontation slipping through his fingers. He opted to stick with truth over false modesty.

'Yes, sir. I was.'

Sevatar tilted his head, fluid and animal in his movement. The Space Marine studied the human as if trying to see the man Ulatal had been in the wreckage he'd become.

'Well, at least they scraped you out of the cockpit, even if they left your looks behind.'

Ulatal said nothing. Holding a conversation with the first captain of the VIII Legion was like trying to ward off an approaching grain thresher with nothing but prayer.

'Well?' Sevatar prompted. 'You said you wished to speak to someone present for the Devastation of Zoah.' The Night Lord knocked his knuckles lightly against his breastplate. 'I was there. So speak.'

Ulatal cleared his throat. 'I don't know if I should file these reports. The Thousand Sons cast our Legion in a… negative light.'

Sevatar still hadn't relinquished the data-slate. 'That they do,' he agreed. 'Though it would hardly be the first report to do so. Who filed this

miserable poetry?'

'An officer listed as "Khayon of the Khenetai", who belongs to something called "The Order of the Jackal". He's cited as captain of the warship *Tlaloc*.'

Sevatar shrugged, the barest movement of his shoulders. 'Never heard of him. I couldn't tell you if he was there or not. I paid little attention to the Thousand Sons junior officers at Zoah. They all tended to whine in the same way. They blurred in my memory after a while.'

He paused, reflecting for a moment. ' "Order of the Jackal". "Khenetai". What amusing titles the other Legions use.'

A strange insult, Ulatal thought, *from a man known as the Prince of Crows.*

Sevatar's stare was sudden and bestial. Not aggressive, but undeniably animal. Something that might almost pass for a smile infected its way across those scarred lips, inch by inch.

He hears me. Ulatal felt an icy prickle along his spine. *Emperor's blood, he can hear me.*

But the Night Lord said nothing, did nothing, beyond gesturing for him to continue.

'I can't file the final report in this form,' said Ulatal. 'It's judgemental, melancholic and reads like propaganda. And there's the risk to morale, as well. First, I need to confirm the report's veracity. After that, I can gather counterpoints that balance its biased tone.'

Sevatar blinked at last, and his imitation of a smile faded. 'Here is what you may do. You may file this report as it is, leaving it in the archives for future generations to regard as a mild and anomalous curiosity. Or you can delete it, and no one will know or care. If you do either of those actions, you will leave these quarters, and then leave the *Nightfall*, returning to what remains of your life. You will never fly a Fury fighter again, but your mind is not broken. Only your body. You will almost certainly be promoted for your service, either to a frigate's command crew or to the rank of group captain overseeing a carrier vessel's fighter squadrons. Is that a good life? A bad life? I do not know. My standards are my own, and yours are yours. So humour me as we paint more of this grand picture. You will rise high, yes, of that I have no doubt. Yet you will always piss into medicae bags. You will always taste blood when you eat, from your false teeth and your

ruptured insides. You will always labour to breathe with the single shredded lung that remains in your chest. Even if you are granted more vat-grown organs and accept cybernetic grafts, you will heal, but never really recover. Your body was destroyed in that crash, Orthos. You know that. I see the knowledge in your eyes. I may have no gift for reading human emotion, but I promise you, I read truth and lies as easily as other men read the words of a book.'

Ulatal exhaled slowly. He said nothing, nothing at all.

The Night Lord reached for one of his belt pouches and drew forth a fist-sized orb of polished brass. Ulatal raised an eyebrow at the sight of the antiquated holo-projector as Sevatar rested it in the centre of the low table between them. The warrior rose with purring armour joints as he spoke once more.

'You can leave and live that life, Ulatal. Or you can watch this, and get the answers you've come for. Contained within are no vital records that will benefit the Great Crusade, no damning truths that will threaten either of the two Legions involved. Just the words of two brothers at odds. Words that neither brother wishes those outside their Legions to know. This…' he tapped the activation rune with his thumb but didn't push it down, '…is a matter for legionaries and primarchs. A family matter. Not something for mortal eyes and ears, and certainly not the Crusade's archives.'

'Then why offer it to me?'

Sevatar chuckled. 'Why indeed.' His tone made it rhetorical. 'Farewell, wing commander.'

Ulatal watched as Sevatar reclaimed the immense war spear. 'This recording, first captain. If I watch it…'

The Night Lord fixed his black eyes upon Ulatal's uplifted gaze. 'Are you asking if you will forfeit your life by learning the truth?'

Ulatal nodded. Sevatar did not.

'Let me ask you something, Orthos Ulatal. If you were to die tonight… would you really care?'

The spire at the heart of the city was fashioned from an igneous blue stone quarried only on Zoah's easternmost landmass. Acknowledged by Zoah's population as the wonder of their world, it was a dizzying feat of architecture that pierced the clouds - a monument to mankind's hard work

and its capacity to create beauty.

Sevatar looked at the tower, his targeting reticule dancing here and there, tracking for structural weaknesses. Its beauty didn't figure into his thoughts, nor did the idea that other people would find it beautiful. His mind didn't work that way.

In the parlance of Zoah's native culture, the building was called the *Ivil'kuuh*, translating into Gothic as the Tower of Serenity. The translation was inexact, for serenity in the Zoahn culture implied not peaceful enlightenment, but a condescending sense of *noblesse oblige* of an educated elite over the ignorant masses. He knew this because he'd read it in the mission data-feeds, and studying the operational data was what a good soldier had to do. Context was vital in a warzone.

'It's beautiful, isn't it?' Shang's voice was a crackling purr across the vox.

I don't know, thought Sevatar. *How do you tell if something is beautiful?*

'Yes,' he said aloud, because he suspected that's what he was supposed to be thinking. 'Truly a marvel.'

'It will be a shame to pull it down,' Shang added.

'The law is the law,' Sevatar replied with the instinct of repetition. Shang's reply was a grunt of agreement.

Sevatar looked at the tower's base, and the targeting crosshairs on his retinal display flashed across several far more tempting targets. The Thousand Sons ringing the tower stood in ordered ranks, bolters and blades clutched at parade rest. They waited - no, they stood guard - and the only thing that would change that fact would be the words of the primarchs currently in orbit.

Sometimes the Thousand Sons' efforts were visible, sometimes they weren't. Every now and again, Sevatar saw a shimmer of the telekinetic barrier in the air. Each time, the tower wavered like a mirage behind the invisible wall of force that kept it unharmed.

The Night Lords first captain crunched over the broken rock of the conquered city, boots grinding down on the dusty gravel of destroyed homes. He approached the nearest Thousand Sons officer - a dark-skinned man clad in the red and gold of his Legion, his eyes ringed with weariness and an artistic curl of kohl.

'Ahzek,' he hailed the warrior.

'Captain Sevatarion.' The Thousand Sons legionary gave a Nostraman

hand gesture of greeting, palm open and out to show no violent intent, and Sevatar smiled at the courtesy because smiling was something people were supposed to do.

'Has there been word?'

Ahzek Ahriman shook his head. 'None.'

Both warriors looked across their opposing ranks of men. Where the Thousand Sons stood in defiant vigil, as rigid as automatons, the Night Lords were grouped in loose flame-unit teams, speaking amongst themselves and eyeing the tower's defenders with a naked revulsion that curdled their white faces.

The stalemate had stood for three hours so far. Packs of Night Lords occasionally spread apart so pairs of warriors could duel - over abused honour, avenging insults or mere boredom. The Thousand Sons allowed themselves no such laxity in discipline.

'Is it worth all this?' Sevatar asked, nodding to the opposing forces. In the last hour, battle tanks had been drawn up on both sides.

This close to the tower, he could feel the telekinetic barrier prickling at his skin. A maddening and unscratchable itch, a pressure that seeped inside his skull and expanded to plump up his brainflesh. He clenched his teeth and swallowed the desire to vomit. For a moment, he thought he could hear the chanting murmurs of the Thousand Sons over the other Legion's vox-links. They sounded ghostly, foreign, unbearably tired.

'Yes,' Ahriman replied. 'The Emperor would weep if we allowed this knowledge to be destroyed.'

Sevatar exhaled through closed teeth. Other people's delusions were such tiresome processes to deal with. 'If that were the case, my primarch would not be ordering us to burn it all to ash.'

There was patience in Ahriman's expression - patience and sympathy. 'With the greatest respect, Captain Sevatarion, you speak in ignorance. We have sailed the tides of the Great Ocean in ways no other Legion can imagine, let alone comprehend. The lore within this tower pertains to the realm behind the Veil, and only we are qualified to judge its worth. The Crimson King's word is the only decree with any weight here. We will take this lore to Prospero and then, once it has been studied, we will take it on to Terra.'

Sevatar managed to unclench his jaw. 'You have a way of treating brother-

warriors like children, you know. The sugary treacle in your tone does not hide the fact you are a patronising Terran shithead.'

Ahriman shook his head a second time, patient in the face of this tirade. 'It is not my intention to mock you, Jago.'

Sevatar's features twitched. 'I am returning to orbit to see if our fathers are any closer to reaching a conclusion.'

'I will accompany you,' Ahriman replied. 'But I would like your assurance that your forces will not open fire on the tower once we leave.'

'But I've brought up all this artillery.' Sevatar swept a hand across the ruined city, where a battalion of VIII Legion armour rattled and growled on idling engines. 'It would be such a shame not to use it.'

'I mean it. I want your word.'

Sevatar stared at his counterpart. 'If I gave you that assurance, you would actually believe me. Wouldn't you?'

'I would hope you would keep your word,' said Ahriman.

Sevatar snorted, not in mockery but honest surprise. 'No one as naive as you has any right to be patronising, Ahzek.'

'Knowledge is neither good nor evil, brother. It gains morality only in its use. If used with malice in mind, it becomes evil. If used to benefit others, it becomes good.'

The two brothers had been speaking for some time, and it showed on their faces. The first of them was a red-skinned giant, armoured in Tizcan bronze and Prosperine gold, both metals possessing the very barest suggestion of scarlet in their metallic hues. Flowing sigils decorated the armour plating in patterns of arcane tracery. Where the giant's right eye should have been, a clenched slit marred the aristocratic beauty of his features. Of the eye that had once nestled within the closed socket, only speculation remained.

The second brother was rangy where his kinsman was muscled, ragged where the other was grand, with skin the white of unclean ice and hair the dirty black of chiropteran wings. He sat while the other stood tall.

This second brother looked down at his own gauntleted hands. He deployed and retracted a pair of great metal claws, over and over, with nasty hisses of adamantium grating against ceramite.

'The law is the law,' said the pale brother. He didn't look up from his gauntlets. Twin metallic slashes accompanied the deployment of his claws

again, flashing from their housings on his forearms.

At the chamber's edges, several Space Marine warriors stood in silent vigil. Names and faces and helmets that were renowned across the emergent Imperium: each one a hero in his own right. Such a gathering would, in better circumstances, spell the annihilation or subjugation of a culture resistant to Imperial compliance. Now these worthies stood quietly, watching their fathers fight over the right to deliver the final blow to the world below, or to spare it from oblivion.

One of the warriors clad in midnight war-plate, a man as morbidly pale as his primarch, with a blade-scar across his lips, shook his head as he spoke up at last.

'Please spare us your moral relativism, uncle.'

Several of the Thousand Sons, resplendent in their crimson plate, stiffened at the warrior's words. Magnus narrowed his left eye as he gazed upon his brother, refusing to look at the Night Lord that had spoken.

'If your sons cannot keep from childish outbursts, brother, perhaps it's best if they leave us.'

The ragged primarch retracted his claws once more. The sigh that ghosted through his sharp teeth was weighted by weariness. He said nothing. His posture of tired defiance spoke for him.

Micromovements among the Thousand Sons officers betrayed them as they voxed to one another on private channels while standing at attention. The Night Lords commanders opposite them stood at ease, not bothering to mirror their counterparts. Ahriman, first captain of the XV Legion, held his staff straight as he stood at attention: a transhuman avatar of statuesque perfection.

His dark reflection across the room, Sevatar, was leaning on his chainglaive. It was impossible for a transhuman warrior-murderer to look insouciant, but the first captain of the Night Lords came close.

'We should—' Sevatar began.

'Silence,' both primarchs said at once. And wonder of wonders, it worked. Sevatar went back to staring at Ahriman, perhaps wondering how skilled the other Legion commander was with his trinket-laden staff. Ahriman, in contrast, ignored Sevatar entirely. His focus was on the conversation unfolding in the centre of the chamber.

Magnus the Red knelt before his brother, eye to eye. His voice softened.

'Pull your men back from the tower, Konrad. You think me too proud to compromise? I am not. Not over a matter so vital, for knowledge so critical. Give me two weeks to comb the depths of this trove, to separate the truth from the harmful lies. I will destroy anything that bears the stain of deceit, myself.'

The claws slashed free. They slid back into their vambrace housings. They slashed back out again.

'Do not do this,' Magnus pressed. 'Do not commit this lore to flame.'

Konrad Curze lifted his dark eyes to meet his brother's halved gaze. 'I will brook no compromise. I will give no ground. The library will burn.'

'Brother.' Magnus' voice was a strangled plea. 'Let me send word to our father first. Let his word be the judgement we seek. He would never wish this library destroyed, I promise you. And I will remain with you while we wait. Neither I, nor my sons, will enter the Tower of Serenity until the Emperor sends his blessing.'

'How confident you are,' the Night Haunter replied. He had gone back to looking down at his hands. The claws slashed out yet again.

'I am,' Magnus confessed, passion giving heart to his tone. 'I am, brother. For decades even before my rediscovery and Prospero's welcome into the Imperium, I spoke with father across the tides of the Great Ocean. Mind to mind, soul to soul.'

'Soul.' Curze's chuckle was the rasp of a saw blade across bone. '*Soul*. You talk such pretty nonsense, brother. Spirits and tutelaries and Great Oceans and *souls*.'

Magnus rose to his feet. Gold flashed as he turned away in regret.

Curze's anaemic visage settled into a miserable mask of indulgence. 'Do you believe you are the only one to have spoken with father? That you alone know his wishes and his secrets, and what he desires us to achieve out here? Tell me truly, Magnus - do you honestly think we are all nothing but fools, capering in your shadow?'

The Crimson King's features hardened, as did his voice. 'I speak of revelation and vision, and you speak petty words of bitterness. Brother, I'd hoped for so much more. Was your hunger to destroy not sated with the massacres you inflicted upon the people of this world?'

'Massacres,' Curze murmured the words, 'that you did not stop. Massacres that spared ninety per cent of this world's population and reached

compliance in half the time Guilliman had estimated. So do not object to my "massacres"', and do not speak the word as if it were some filthy sin.'

Magnus would not be cowed. 'The campaign was yours to prosecute as you saw fit. But this library, this lore…'

'That word again. *Lore*. You clutch at it, investing it with preciousness, holding it out before you as a talisman. What will you do with this *lore*, Magnus? Take it back to Prospero? Set it free for all to learn and know, believing you enrich their lives?'

Magnus said nothing at first. He looked upon his brother, feeling the cold creep of unwelcome revelation.

'Such hate,' he said, almost in disbelief. 'Such depths of selfish hate.'

Curze grunted beneath that gaze, looking back down at his gauntlets. The claws retracted once more, then flashed free yet again.

'It isn't spite that binds me to this course of action,' the Night Lords primarch said softly. 'The knowledge in that spire is the crown jewel of a corrupt culture. Their beliefs should be destroyed to aid compliance and prevent a backslide into heathenism. Obedience is what matters, Magnus. They will be taught to obey. Through obedience, they will become Imperial.'

'No, Konrad.' Sensing a chance for unity, Magnus matched his tone to his brother's. 'You may be right about the people of this world, but not the knowledge they've accrued. Let me take it to the Emperor. That's all I ask.'

'I've already told you. I will brook no compromise. I will give no ground. Drop the kine shield around the Tower of Serenity, for if your warriors seek to maintain the barrier once bombardment begins, I can't promise they will remain unharmed.'

'You wouldn't,' Magnus sighed. 'Even your murderous clan wouldn't open fire on their own brothers.'

Curze looked up at his brother, his expression much the same as Sevatar's had been when the first captains spoke on the surface of Zoah.

'All you prove,' Curze said, 'is how little you know me. Sevatar, give the order to open fire.'

Magnus' remaining eye widened. He reached out a hand. 'Brother—'

'This is Sevatar,' the Night Lord spoke across the vox network. 'Open fire on the tower. Bring it down.'

'Brother!' Magnus called, then… ceased. He tensed, wincing as he felt the

impacts begin on the psychic shield his sons had raised around their treasure. Several of the Thousand Sons present grunted and staggered in psionic sympathy.

Curze's claws retracted and deployed in the momentary silence. 'When the Emperor came to my world, he brought light to Nostramo, a world that had never seen the sun. He brought the light of *knowledge*, Magnus. Suddenly, my people could see the wider galaxy around them. They could perceive other worlds and other cultures, city after city that didn't dwell in the endless dark. Civilisations of peace and laughter. That knowledge didn't free them, brother. It shackled them. It wrapped them in misery. Nostramo heaves with their sorrow, that the cost of their peace is fear and blackness. My people suffer in my absence. Law breaks down as they fight their bindings. And why? Because of knowledge. Because a well-meaning teacher brought a perspective they weren't yet ready to know.'

Magnus' features were tight with concentration. Even so, he shook his head, his voice breathy with realisation.

'You are a hateful, blind creature. The Emperor will hear of this.'

Curze didn't gloat. He didn't even smile. 'How long can you hold that barrier for, Magnus?'

'Forever, if I wish it.' Now it was Magnus speaking through clenched teeth. 'Forever and a day.'

Curze still didn't smile, though did his eyes glint with cold mirth? It seemed, to at least one observer, that they did.

'And how long before your legionaries begin to wear out from exhaustion? How long before accidents occur, and all of those detonating shells kill your sons on the ground? A day? A week? A month? I have the ammunition. Or I could pull my warriors back, and open fire with the *Nightfall*. How long would you keep your Thousand Sons on the surface then? This only ends one way, Magnus. My way. I would rather you stood with me, and prevented bloodshed. Your men don't deserve to die for their misguided optimism.'

Magnus nodded, the gesture one of acceptance if not agreement. 'I will remember this, Konrad. I promise you, I will remember this.'

'Good,' said Curze. 'Lessons should be remembered. That is why they are taught in the first place.'

'Ah.' Now Magnus smiled. His regal features were a poor foundation for

malice, but there was nothing warm in that smile 'A lesson, is it? Bold words, from a man that just claimed ignorance was bliss.'

Curze's jaw tightened; the most emotion he'd shown thus far. 'I will hold fire for thirty minutes. Get your Legion off the ground. The tower falls in half an hour.'

The claws slashed out once again, and Curze's image flickered with distortion. Magnus' did the same. The walls of the chamber blurred with static, and…

…and Ulatal stared at the space where the two demigods had been a moment before. The hololithic recording faded away, and the device on the table still clicked as it cooled. Ulatal felt the stillness of his assigned quarters as a physical caress against his skin.

'I fear Magnus was right,' he said to himself.

'Perhaps he was,' Sevatar allowed. Ulatal jerked at realising he wasn't alone, and his reknitted bones throbbed with the sudden motion.

Sevatar was standing in the doorway, his spear in his hand. Ulatal resisted a groan at the fresh wave of pain flowing through him, from moving after remaining still for so long.

He hadn't heard Sevatar return. Now the bulkhead stood open.

'Why?' he asked the warrior. 'Why did you do it?'

'You are a military man. You know the weight of classified information, and the many reasons such data is withheld.'

'The Great Crusade is grander than that, though.' Ulatal heard the naive optimism in his own voice, but it didn't shame him. 'It's about… hope. Enlightenment. Truth.'

'Some minds are not equipped to deal with the truth.' Sevatar walked into the room, his boots thudding on the floor. With the butt of his spear, he casually pushed the door closed. It sealed with a mechanical crunch. 'Perhaps both primarchs were right, or both were wrong. It hardly matters.'

'How can the truth not matter?'

'Ah, the *truth* matters,' said Sevatar. He looked reflective for a moment. It wasn't an expression that looked at home on his features. 'But what is true is not the same as who is right or wrong. The tower fell. We burned everything we found inside to ash and cinder, and then we shelled the spire until it was naught but dust. That is the truth. That is what matters.'

He looked down at the human, black eyes unblinking. 'You learned what you came to learn. Was the recording enlightening?'

Ulatal nodded. 'It was.' He smiled suddenly, a rare expression aboard the *Nightfall*. 'I've never seen demigods argue before.'

'Yes, it has entertaining elements,' Sevatar admitted. 'We are told it would be awful for morale if it ever became common knowledge, however. Primarchs must not be seen to be at odds with one another. The Crusade's mandate is strict on these matters. I doubt most humans would care about or understand the gravity of the argument, but I did not write the codes of conduct. I merely enforce them. Sit still, please.'

'Why?'

Sevatar raised his chainglaive. His armour joints growled in chorus. The chain-teeth stayed inactive; they would rend flesh easily enough without the warrior needing to gun the weapon's trigger.

'This is why.'

Ulatal set his jaw and refused to close his eyes. He stared up at his killer, awaiting the blur of movement that would herald the end.

'Sevatar.'

Sevatar stood motionless.

'Sevatar.' The voice crackled from the vox-link in the first captain's collar.

The warrior remained unmoving. 'What is it, Shang?'

'The cripple,' came the vox-voice. *'We've received word that he has been assigned to the Voidmaw as group captain.'*

Sevatar, with his spear still raised high, looked down at the man he was about to kill. 'Is that a rank and role you wish to claim?'

Ulatal didn't move, not even to nod or shake his head. He honestly didn't know what he was going to say until he drew a shaking breath, and spoke.

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MERCY OF THE DRAGON

Nick Kyme

OceanofPDF.com

The final wall had fallen, and with it Venikov. The city had been called 'the Bloody Bastion' by the Ranknar Blood-Guard. It was impregnable, they had said. Now Venikov burned, its precincts as hollow as the confidence that had once proclaimed it unbreakable.

And as it fell, and burned, the Imperial war machine ground on.

Sarda watched the city fall through his omniscope, glad for the kilometres between him and the armour-clad star warriors who had laid siege to his world. The hills where he had led those fleeing the destruction of Venikov would do little to stop the oppressors, however.

'How many?' asked Veddus. Sarda thought the *goreov* priest sounded weary, not just with the fatigue of the war but a spiritual malaise that came with the almost certain knowledge that your culture and everything you knew would soon be extinguished and replaced by another.

But then Sarda had always thought too much. He had been thinking ever since the so-called Emperor had made his proclamation. The Emperor had spoken of unity and compliance, but to Sarda this had sounded like conquest and annihilation. He adjusted the strap on his leather hauberk, suddenly uncomfortable.

'Blood-Marshal Enoch has forged a last redoubt. At the old keep in southern Venikov.'

'How many, captain?' repeated Veddus, the sound of a cloak rasping as he swept closer.

Sarda tweaked the brass omniscope, adjusting the dials to focus in on the warriors and refugees fleeing Venikov. They were heading south, to the

hills, to the next city on Erod. The last city. He adjusted his armour again. The studs were digging in through his padded jerkin. A rime of salt crusted his forehead where his leather helm met skin and made him sweat.

'A few thousand.'

'Is that all?' uttered Veddus, pausing at the thought.

Sarda heard the priest's breath reverberate against the brass mask. 'Over a hundred thousand men entered that city.'

'Blood-Marshal Enoch has another thousand trying to hold them off.'

'Teeth of Ranknar…' hissed Veddus.

Sarda doubted their patron god was listening. There was only one god that really mattered now, and he was on the other side. The Dragon.

'We'll need to fall back to Romistad. The Red Citadel is formidable,' said Sarda.

Veddus nodded, starting to grow in confidence again. 'Yes. Out here in the hills we are vulnerable. The Red Citadel can withstand a siege. Let's see if these curs have the stomach for it. I'll see the Dragon slain on our walls. Bled dry! I swear it by Ranknar!'

A great explosion lit the horizon to the north. Tremors were felt as far as the hills. They ripped Venikov and the old keep apart.

Sarda lowered the omniscope, and let out a long shuddering breath. He faced Veddus. The blank visage of the mask was reflected in the priest's eyes. The mask's stylised representation of a gaunt human face, edged instead of curved, could not hide his fear.

'What is it?' he demanded. 'What happened?'

'Blood-Marshal Enoch is dead, goreov.'

Veddus swallowed audibly. 'Are you certain?'

Sarda pointed a crimson glove in the direction of the city.

Except there was no city. Venikov was gone.

Only fire remained, a conflagration so large and ferocious it engulfed the sky like slow spreading ink and turned it red. And at the heart of the blaze, killing with fang and claw, a giant in emerald scale.

A myth brought terrifyingly to life.

Veddus scarcely had voice enough to name it out loud, 'The Dragon…'

'I am a son of a blacksmith,' said Vulkan, gazing across the desert, 'and you…'

'What?' asked the Outlander. 'What am I?'

Vulkan turned to regard the warrior next to him.

'You are no mere outlander.'

The heat of the day was fading on Nocturne and the tribesmen out on the ash plains were bringing in their herds as the two great beings stood on a high dune looking out at a world of fire.

The warrior bowed His head, acknowledging the truth. He then raised a gauntleted hand to the sun and watched the light reflect off the metal. He had shed a lie, this warrior, one meant to put the Noctumeans and their chieftain at ease.

'Am I not a man, Vulkan?' He asked, the rays catching not only His gauntlet but the rest of His armour-clad body, so that He shone with a radiant golden light.

'You look like a king,' Vulkan replied, and for the first time felt uncomfortable in the rough apparel of a blacksmith.

'I am no king, but is a king not also a man?'

'Not to the vassals of his kingdom.'

The warrior smiled, a mentor pleased with his student, and turned to face Vulkan. His hair caught on the hot wind, trailing like black smoke. His short red cloak fluttered, a statesman about to address his people.

'I am the Emperor.'

'Ah,' said Vulkan, his turn to smile now, 'greater than a king. And your empire is the stars?'

The Emperor followed Vulkan's gaze to the red-stained heavens and grew sombre.

'Not yet. There is darkness out in the void.' He looked back at Vulkan, His eyes cold with sorrow. 'That is why I need you.' This mood lasted only a moment before the warmth returned. 'A blacksmith's son. To help me bring the light.'

'Of creation?'

'Yes. And to be one of my generals.'

Vulkan scowled, suddenly ill at ease.

'I am no warlord.'

'And yet war has come to the galaxy. It must, Vulkan, and you shall be one of those who leads it. Mankind must emerge from Old Night and embrace the Truth.'

'Your truth?' The words had the bite of accusation that Vulkan did not try to soften.

'The Imperial Truth. That there are no gods and mankind's fate is what he or she makes it.'

'I know only the truth of metal and how it bends to fire,' Vulkan looked down at his hands as if imagining the fuller gripped against his leathern skin, 'the truth of what I can see, and the earth beneath my feet.'

'And that is why I need you.'

'I still don't understand.'

'You will.'

'And what if I do not wish to leave? General, warlord, call it what you will, but I have never imagined a sword in my hand or an army at my command.'

'You lead your people.'

'That is different. I protect Nocturne from those who would see it harmed, or enslaved. You are talking about conquest. I am a maker, not a destroyer.'

'You would prefer a hammer to a sword, and an anvil against which to strike it.'

Vulkan nodded.

The Emperor stepped out of the light and His lustre appeared to fade. He seemed smaller, more ordinary. His face looked weathered, as if He had spent some time out in the wild places of His world. It was the face of a farmer or a hunter.

'I want you to join me willingly, Vulkan. Will you allow me to convince you? I am confident you will see the necessity of your presence and see my cause as just.'

The wind rose across the desert, bringing with it the scent of ash. A mountain peak erupted, releasing a tongue of flame that tasted the heavens. From deep beneath the earth a sympathetic roar answered.

'The Time of Trial comes again soon,' said Vulkan.

'It does,' said the Emperor, 'and it touches more than just this world. This is a trial for all of mankind.'

Vulkan's gaze lingered on the mountain - its name was Deathfire - before returning again to the Emperor.

'I agree to your proposal. If you can convince me, I will leave Nocturne and go with you. But I have questions.'

'Then ask, Vulkan, and I promise you I shall only answer with the truth.'

They had promised the truth, but had come cloaked in lies.

Sarda remembered these words from the Great Goreov, the Incarnadine himself. They were to be the priest's last - the violent kiss of heat as the temple dais turned into a storm of fire, and blood drowned out what followed.

The priests were all dead bar one, their faith slain along with them.

'We will still have vengeance,' said Veddus, leaning in to Sarda's ear. He could smell the alcohol on the goreov's breath. It had the tang of warm iron to it.

They had sealed the gates to the Red Citadel. Cannons girded its high, rust-red walls. Men thronged its battlements dressed in full martial panoply: Blood-Guard in crimson leather and Red Knights in ceramic war-garb that reflected their namesake. It was a long, deep wall the garrison held, one that stretched for almost a kilometre to both the east and the west. At the heart of the city, imposing and formidable, was Ranknar's oldest keep. It had never been taken. Ever. The Incarnadine who held it held Ranknar.

Yet as Venikov faded to a dirty orange glow on the horizon, those behind the walls cowered. They feared the fire. They feared the Dragon.

'We should not have refused them,' said Sarda, and felt himself yanked hard by his gorget to face Veddus.

'Renounce our faith!' the priest spat drunkenly, and drew a few eyes in their direction. 'You are a holy warrior of Ranknar…' He trailed off. The title had less and less meaning with every passing hour.

'And where is Ranknar now?' asked Sarda.

Veddus released him. 'He would not abandon us,' he rasped, and looked to the courtyard below. 'We must make a sacrifice…'

Sarda seized the priest's wrist as he made to draw his bloodletter. The knife's dark edge caught the fading light and flashed in Veddus' eyes, making him squint.

'It does not matter any more. What good would it do?' said Sarda.

Veddus made a half-hearted struggle. Those who caught his hungry gaze recoiled.

'We can still make an offering. And we have weapons. More than one. They have served Erod for centuries. The blessed of Ranknar. He would not —' The words caught in his throat as he joined the hundreds of others in the Red Citadel staring at the horizon.

A black, irregular line stood out amongst the smoke and the fading glow of fire. It was a slow moving tide a wave of elongated cannon barrels, tank tracks and riveted armour, and it was about to wash Romistad and the Red Citadel away.

'Raise shields!' a watchman cried.

'Ranknar preserve us,' whispered Veddus, as the heavens shook with manufactured thunder and the Imperial bombardment began.

And as the first enemy shells began to fall, and the cannons on the Red Citadel's walls answered, a dark mood came over Veddus.

'Gather them, Sarda.' The bloodletter kissed the warrior's neck and drew a bead of fluid shaped like a red ruby. 'As many as you can.' He looked to the Imperial line and the star-warriors advancing heedlessly into the Ranknar cannonade. 'I will anoint the *bogatyrs*, and then unleash them.'

'And if they fail?' asked Sarda.

'With faith, they shall not,' said the priest, bile colouring his voice. 'But if they do, then we both know we have one last gambit to play.'

'Was it a trick?' asked Vulkan, looking to the sky and half expecting the promised ship to appear, belching fire through a swathe of sulphuric cloud.

'A trick?' asked the Emperor.

'The way you shed your disguise. You didn't merely cast off a cloak or lower a mask, you *changed*… everything. Is this,' he gestured to the Emperor in His gilded glory, 'your true self?'

'Isn't identity a matter of perception? You see… what, a gold-clad ruler? A king, you said. Others might see something different. A man. A father.'

'But was it a trick?' Vulkan pressed.

'What does it matter? Please,' said the Emperor holding up a hand to show His sincerity, 'I am not trying to avoid the question, but I am interested in your rationale for asking it.'

'I would know the manner and design of the man who bids me leave my home and people. I am a simple man, but do not think of me as credulous.'

'You are neither, Vulkan,' the Emperor replied, but did not elaborate, 'and, yes, I suppose it was a trick of sorts. A means of determining the truth.'

'Then are you a sorcerer?' Vulkan asked. 'Was it magic?'

The Emperor's mood darkened, but fractionally, so that only someone who was particularly astute would notice. Vulkan slightly raised his eyebrow.

'Not a sorcerer,' said the Emperor. 'Magic… is not real, it is merely science yet to be understood. Show a primitive culture fire for the first time and they call it magic. Bring a starship to a backwards world yet to invent the combustion engine and it is hailed as witchcraft. Superstition, the darkness of old ways and the atrocities committed in their name, that is what I wish to bring an end to.'

'So, you are a scientist?'

'A reductive term,' the Emperor answered, thoughtful, 'but as fitting as any. I have a laboratory and have accomplished much to reach this point, through experimentation and endeavour.'

'And war,' said Vulkan. 'You are a warrior too.'

'Yes, and war. I won't lie, there has been blood spilled on this journey and there will be more. I never imagined the enlightenment of mankind would be an easy task, nor one accomplished without violence. However regrettable.' The Emperor's eyes seem to cloud for a moment then, lost in abstract thought. 'I have had failures. Some of which I shall never speak of.'

'My brothers?'

The Emperor did not answer, and that was answer enough.

'Will you not tell me of them?' asked Vulkan. 'Are they like me?'

'Utterly unlike you,' said the Emperor, brightening, 'and that is your single greatest trait. My proudest achievement.'

'Will I meet them if I agree to follow you into the stars?'

'Yes, you will, though I have yet to find them all. You will learn much from them, and they from you.'

Vulkan glanced down at the sand accumulating around his boots. The desert was shifting again. Soon it would swallow this ridge and another would emerge elsewhere.

'Are they from worlds like Nocturne?'

'As harsh and beautiful, you mean?' asked the Emperor. 'Some are. Some are kings, others are scholars, chieftains, slaves…' his eyes fell upon Vulkan, 'even blacksmiths.'

'What would they think of me? Could I really feel a bond of fraternity with them? And they with me?'

The Emperor smiled. 'Let me tell you of Ferrus.'

The Gorgon grinned, an altogether ugly expression on such a grizzled face.

'He is ferocious,' he said, his voice as gritty and harsh as his appearance. His black armour was shorn to the bare ceramite in places, though the scorch marks caused by fire barely showed. 'The way you described him, I thought…'

'You did not expect a warrior,' said the Emperor, His gilded panoply gleaming. He stood upon a blasted hillock, not that He needed the vantage to look imposing. His stature and power spoke for themselves. Despite the battles, He remained pristine. As radiant and terrifying as a nuclear sunrise.

'I expected a blacksmith, but he is a destroyer.'

Much of the outer lands beyond the major cities of Ranknar had been reduced to ash. A bombardment lasting several days had softened up the native defences, but had seen the same forces dug in instead of broken as the Emperor had hoped. The Imperial assault, when it came, swept across all six continents as relentless as a hurricane. Still, the Ranknar had endured, buoyed by their perverse faith, the reason for the Imperium's proclamation of extinction.

And so the Emperor had unleashed His Dragon, and the lands had burned. Only then, slowly swallowed by fire, had the Ranknar showed any signs of defeat.

'I thought the Wolf King had fury,' said Ferrus, admiring the choleric spirit of his newfound brother, 'But this… Where did you find him?'

'A death world,' said the Emperor, His piercing gaze seeing more and ranging farther than any other on both the battlefield and second battle line where He stood with His son, Ferrus Manus. 'One consumed by fire.'

Ferrus gave a snort of laughter.

They watched from the blasted hillock, the troops and armoured divisions arrayed before them and ready for the Gorgon's command. His warriors, his Iron Hands. The Dragon led a company of them, and several cohorts of army auxilia. The scent of engines and hot metal from the idling artillery and heavy battle tanks wafted over the mustering, but petered out and was swallowed up by the stink of sweat and death by the time it reached the battle less than a hundred metres away.

Ferrus folded his silver arms, restive. They shimmered with an uncanny lustre, the metal of their forging as miraculous as it was mysterious. A massive warhammer lay against one armoured shoulder, a gift from Fulgrim and one he desired to bloody again. For now, he would do as his father

ordered. He would watch, and let the Dragon wreak havoc. Ferrus suspected it was not only his newfound brother who was being tested this day.

'Draconic in both aspect and temperament,' he said, alluding to the savage scalloped war-plate worn by the Dragon.

'You taught him much of your craft, Ferrus?' asked the Emperor.

'None, in truth. He needed no help in that regard. When I reached the forge, he was gone and the armour with him.'

The Emperor smiled, as if pleased with His works.

'Your assessment?'

'Overly flamboyant, but it appears to serve well.'

'*Him*, not his armour, Ferrus.'

A raised eyebrow and a grunt of acknowledgement preceded the Gorgon's reply.

'He fights like a Medusan ur-wyrm. Are they all like that where he came from?'

'No, he is unique. As are you.'

His silver fingers clenched and unclenched without Ferrus realising. He nodded.

'He is impressive,' he admitted, then turned disdainful, 'but Russ and Horus, even Fulgrim, they match his prowess. I see nothing special about him.'

'You will.' The Emperor paused abruptly, and the Gorgon felt his hackles rise. 'They are opening the gates.'

Ferrus hid his unease at his father's use of prescience, remaining bullish. 'Then they are as foolish as they are blind. A sortie is insane. They don't know when they are beaten.'

'Does any beast, when cornered?'

'They risk annihilation,' said Ferrus, as the gigantic city gates did indeed open.

'Desperate men perform desperate acts. I feel fear in them. A fearful enemy attacks without restraint. This will be costly for us.'

A rust-red mist gathered around the opening, obscuring whatever was coming through.

'They are all soldiers, and know the risk.'

'Be wary of profligacy, my son. Life is not so cheap as you might think.'

The ruddy fog parted and what stood before the gate stopped the Gorgon's reply dead. His eyes widened.

The ground shook, felt as far away as the second battle line.

Ferrus swung his warhammer into both hands.

'Now can we intervene?'

The Emperor had already drawn a glittering, golden sword. Its edge burst into flames.

'Yes, now we can.'

The bogatyrs did not walk alone, and where they walked the ground trembled.

Sarda watched them stride from the gate in the languid manner that creatures of such immense stature have, three golem-engines, their phage-swords bleeding red aether and their ocular weapon mounts cycling to lethality. He stood almost eye-to-eye with the bogatyrs despite the fact he was nearly twenty metres up on the city's foremost battlements. His awe at the sight of the Red Citadel's guardians hid a secret disgust for the method by which they had been roused for war.

An army came with them. Six phalanxes of Red Knights of the Orders *Sangrov* and *Incarnadov* rode at the flanks while twelve platoons of Blood-Guard brought up the rear, gun-chariots in tow.

Thunder cracked overhead as artillery on both sides exchanged fire across a kilometres-long battlefront. The tanks of the Imperium sat on the ridge beyond the city, dug in behind makeshift palisades. They faced the cannons jutting from the Red Citadel's walls. Smoke and fire laced the air with every fresh volley. The bogatyrs strode through it, dauntless.

Plumes of earth and fire reached up into the sky with every explosive impact, taking the broken bodies of men with them. The bogatyrs remained inviolate, emerging through overlapping clouds of smoke, their energy shields crackling with particulate.

Sarda watched an ivory giant cut an Imperial tank in two. The vehicle's bifurcated sides fell open, exposing a ruined anatomy within. Nothing lived; the red aether from the phage-swords saw to that. The bogatyrs had the appearance of marble statues, like knights of antiquity, but were nothing of the sort. Fashioned by the goreov priests, they were war engines, part machine, part biological.

They reaped death through the Imperial ranks.

Scores of men fell burning to the radiation beams of a bogatyr's ocular array; another reduced a transport vehicle to molten slag. Small victories, but they gave the Red Knights and the Blood-Guard heart.

Clinging to the battlement's edge, almost wishing he could be part of the melee, Sarda dared to believe…

'We can defeat them,' whispered Veddus. The skin of his hands and forearms was flecked with dark spots. His manner verged on manic, but Sarda agreed. 'Ranknar has not abandoned us. He is with us.'

And Veddus turned as he heard others on the battlements echo his words. He repeated them. Louder.

'He is with us!'

The defenders roared back.

'Ranknar!'

'Wait…' Sarda bellowed over the cries of affirmation. He gestured to the battlefield and all eyes went to where a lone figure held his ground, standing in defiance of the bogatyrs.

Sarda held his breath. Before the ivory knights was a dragon.

'I believe you,' said Vulkan, staring into the desert reaches, trying to commit to memory this desolation that he called home.

'In the Imperial Truth?'

'I believe you want to save mankind. I believe you have a vision and mean to see it done whatever the cost.'

'I have and I will,' the Emperor replied. 'It sounds bloody. It will be. Conquest always is, but there is darkness in the galaxy, Vulkan, the remnants left behind after Old Night. Horrors you can scarcely imagine. Superstition and fear, a race enslaved by its own isolation. There is but one path for mankind that does not end in extinction. The path I offer. I desire mankind's pre-eminence. Its evolution. I raised armies and unified a world to try to accomplish it.'

'And created sons, *primarchs*.'

'Yes,' said the Emperor, His voice serious but not unkind. 'I made you. And your brothers.'

Vulkan frowned. 'Why? You already said we are your generals, your legacy, but why create us so differently and cast us far from your sight?'

The Emperor pursed His lips, and Vulkan suspected there were some truths He would not reveal.

'I am a singular being, Vulkan. I am a man, and also more than man. I sometimes think of myself as a creator, much as you think of yourself. A maker. At other times, a father. Yet, I find I am… *removed*. My concerns are of a lofty nature.'

'You cannot relate to them,' said Vulkan, understanding. 'To mankind, even though you claim to be one of them. You made sons so that you would not be alone, so that you could share company with like minds, if not equal minds.'

The Emperor smiled. 'You are partly right. I have a better fate for mankind. I would see them elevated, long lasting, perpetual.'

'And what of the fates of your sons, sent across the void to worlds of fire and ice? Was that too a part of your design?'

'I see much, but not all,' was all the Emperor would say, and again Vulkan sensed there was more.

Above, the throaty roar of engines shook the sky. A ship appeared, obscured by cloud, a distant but growing silhouette in the heavens.

'A vessel comes,' said the Emperor. 'It is bound for Terra and will arrive soon.' He turned to Vulkan. 'Have I convinced you?'

Vulkan watched the ship, imagining his destiny closing around him, the wide aperture of possibility narrowing to a single vanishing point.

'Vulkan…' said the Emperor, when no answer came, 'are you decided?'

Vulkan met his father's gaze, a father that up until a few hours ago he did not know he had. N'bel was his father, a blacksmith, a good man, a just man. Could this Emperor claim to be so too?

'To leave Nocturne and my people unprotected, it is no easy thing you ask. You want to bring light into darkness, and you will wage war to achieve it. You need warlords. A sword to kill or conquer, not a hammer to build with.'

'I need you, Vulkan. That is why I am here. It is the sole reason I have crossed the sea of stars to reach you. A sword to conquer, a hammer to build. One need not render the other obsolete.'

Vulkan thought on that. He looked back to the desert again, hoping some truth that had so far eluded him would be revealed in the whirling eddies playing across the sand.

'I am torn. I have never considered myself a warrior or a general. I only

want peace. You have told me much of my brothers, of Ferrus, of Fulgrim, Leman and Horus. *They* are generals, bellicose and proud. They are artisans and leaders of men, the conquerors for your age of Imperium. I am a blacksmith, a maker. I understand what I might learn from them, and they from each other. But what could I possibly teach them, father? Answer this and then I will decide.'

* * *

But they were still men, and men could not stand against primarchs.

Ferrus destroyed every knight that dared to cross swords with him, his hammer a deadly metronome in his silver hands. He silently applauded their bravery, but swatted them aside like wasps. An irritant but nothing more.

His true quarry ranged ahead, possessed by an even greater fury and about to charge the gates of the city on his own. When Ferrus came upon the first of the felled statue-engines and saw what its shattered chest cavity harboured, he realised why.

'Blood of Asirnoth…'

He felt the same pure rage well up inside him that had overtaken the Dragon.

A child lay dying in the carcass of the statue-engine, a withered and wretched thing, half drained of blood. It was abominable science, a machine fuelled by the blood of the living, a parasitical engine fed children to give it animus.

Appalled, Ferrus almost missed the vox-crackle in his warhelm. It was the Dragon.

'Bring down the gates,' he said, drunk on wrath, his voice a predatory snarl. *'Now, father!'*

Ferrus found the Emperor on the battlefield, only a short distance away. The Imperial army had closed ranks as the enemy fell back, consolidating to a position of strength, their Emperor inspiring the utmost discipline. If the self-proclaimed Master of Mankind felt anything at the Dragon's words there was no sign. He merely raised his flaming sword. Moments later, a concentrated barrage struck the main gates of the city, a blow so unerring that Ferrus wondered if the Emperor had applied some of his strange craft to make it so.

The gate split apart, the wall that held it rupturing and collapsing at the same time. Dust and smoke billowed outwards, clouding an outpouring of burned and shattered rock. It was a small breach, a crack in an otherwise sprawling face of rock, but it was all Vulkan needed.

The Dragon ran for the gap in the wall, easily outpacing the few warriors still with him, and killed everything in his path.

Ferrus looked down sadly on the dying child and gave it mercy. Then he went after his brother.

'To the Dragon!' he roared to the warriors in his command, vox-boosting his voice so that the very air trembled.

His brother had disappeared into the smoke-choked darkness just in front of the wall.

'He cannot fight an entire army, even a defeated one, and win,' he said.

The Emperor did not answer, and Ferrus had no time to look and see if he had heard him.

And then he saw the weapon, wheeled into position on a great iron carriage. It had the look of a spire, tall and ugly. Barbs ran down a dark metal shaft that terminated in a narrow spike like an arrowhead. It protruded menacingly from behind the city's broken battlements, more dominant than any of its towers and bleeding red miasma.

Ferrus knew its ilk if not this specific design.

Virus weapon.

It was pointing straight up. The natives intended to saturate the atmosphere with a contagion, something wrought by their rancid blood-science.

'Father…'

Now the Emperor spoke.

'I have seen it, my son.'

'There is no time to withdraw. That missile…'

'I will do what I can to stop it.'

Reacting to the obvious threat, the Imperial artillery chain redoubled its efforts and unleashed repeated missile salvoes against the city.

Detonations marched the walls, blasting revetments, tearing the garrison apart, reaching towards the shattered gatehouse.

Ferrus did not slow. He would get to his brother; he would stop the virus missile from ever launching or they would die together. He had about made peace with his potential death when the Dragon's voice came over the vox

again.

'Hold your fire! Hold, hold, all weapons!'

His impassioned command reverberated, reaching enemies and allies alike. He stood before the breach, barely a metre away, though the soot and displaced earth made it impossible to see what had made him stop.

It took a few seconds, but the steady barrage began to slow.

Ferrus kept running, possessed of an urgency that felt strange and unsettling, concern for a brother he had never met. Grey cloud briefly obscured his vision, before it passed and he saw him again, his mysterious brother charging the breach.

The last missile fell, already on its deadly path and too late to be recalled or brought down. It struck the gatehouse. It struck the breach.

'Father!' Ferrus cried out, surprised at his sudden dismay.

His legionaries turned aghast to where fire and destruction had shattered the gatehouse. Men in the Imperial army ranks slumped, stunned. No one had seen a primarch fall before. Most believed they were immortal.

'Nothing could survive…' whispered Ferrus, trying to disbelieve the evidence of his own senses. 'Father, is he…?' he asked, louder.

The Emperor said nothing, as an anxious silence stole over the battlefield. The fighting had stopped.

'Wait…' a weary voice came across the vox, and through the parting smoke, across embers of burning wood and stone still flickering at his leaden feet, emerged the Dragon. He had lost his warhelm and one shoulder guard hung by a ragged thread. There was blood. His own. A crack split his breastplate. He held his left arm close to his body.

Ferrus stopped a metre away.

'You live, though I cannot fathom how,' he said, and eyed the onyx-skinned giant with wary respect.

'I must be tougher than I look.'

Ferrus gave a short, mirthless laugh.

'You look tough, brother.' His eyes narrowed, heightened senses still alert to any sudden threat. 'You bled for them. Why?'

The onyx giant smiled and he moved his arm away to reveal a child lying in his grasp, little more than a babe, terrified but breathing. His red eyes flared like hot coals, diabolic yet warm. It was the first of many contradictions that Ferrus would come to learn about his brother.

'She lives too,' he said. 'And I bled for life, for innocence. She is not alone. There are others. This war is over.'

As they saw the Dragon cradling the child, the warriors of the city lost their taste for blood and laid down their weapons. Then, with the smoke yet to dissipate and the fires of battle still burning, the Emperor came forth and gave his edicts. He promised clemency for the natives and the rule of the Imperium. He promised truth, and shared of his dream for mankind's pre-eminence amongst the stars.

Sarda had listened dumbly to the words of the golden lord and recalled them dimly as he tramped aboard the transport. He was bound for a ship that would take him and his kind to other worlds, to other colonies. He did not spare a glance for the corpse hanging from the battlements. Veddus could rot for all it mattered now. He had seen the Dragon's selfless act, witnessing a sacrifice that gave the word fresh meaning in his eyes. Mercy. They had all seen it. He chose to remember it.

And he had heard his name, spoken amongst the Imperials. Not a dragon, not a beast, but a legend all the same.

They had called him Vulkan.

'What is your answer?' asked Vulkan.

'It is simple,' said the Emperor, and his expression betrayed no emotion beyond the desire to speak the truth. 'Your brothers will be great and powerful. They are beyond mankind in so many ways, as are you. They will learn to be warriors quickly, the ways of conquest and liberation. Leading armies, inspiring the lesser men around them to greatness will be second nature to them, as it will to you. But your lesson, Vulkan, it is the most crucial and you are uniquely disposed to teach it.' The Emperor put a fatherly hand on Vulkan's shoulder. 'Humanity.'

They did not speak again until the ship came, but when it did Vulkan bid farewell to Nocturne and followed his father into the sea of stars.

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SHADOW OF THE PAST

Gav Thorpe

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Kalta-Ar despised the tapping of hammer on chisel and chisel on stone almost as much as he detested the sunless sky that seemed to leech out his soul with its emptiness. The ever-present dusk-like glow sapped his reserves of will as much as the desert heat of his home world had once sapped the energy.

'Is there no way to quieten that infernal tapping?' he snapped at Arkula, his second-in-command.

'I don't think so, brother-cha... Apostle.' Arkula handled the new title with all the ease of a fresh initiate with a primed grenade. 'They have to break the stone somehow.'

Both the Dark Apostle and his coryphaus were clad in ruddy battleplate, all emblems and designs of their former loyalties obscured by the red, the symbols of their renewed allegiance to the true gods painted upon the armour. Together they continued along the top of a half-built wall, surveying the vast construction site around them. The central cloisters had been raised, and the garrison chambers, while a tent city for the slaves spread across the long, shallow hillside. Four small chapels and the central nave of what would be the main shrine of the *Beneficta Diabola* had their foundations laid. Rickety scaffolding clad the white stone of the outer walls, as well as the two high towers that flanked the nave. Slaves crawled, climbed and laboured everywhere, several thousand of them.

The tips of the two pinnacles crackled with energy, drawing in the power of the aether that surrounded the near-deserted moon. Companion rune-stone monoliths on the perimeter gleamed with the dispersed mystical

power, keeping at bay the empyrean mass and the predatory denizens that lurked within.

Kalta-Ar looked up again out of habit, thinking to see a glimpse of a distant star. Just the same ruddy formlessness that had swathed everything since their arrival, slowly stirred by strange currents but otherwise featureless.

Thirty armoured figures were stationed at strategic points around the construction, their bolters and heavier weapons held casually, though the Word Bearers legionaries moved with the same alertness as though in a field of battle.

'It is fascinating, that normal humans are so easily cowed,' observed the Dark Apostle. 'Not a whip or rod in sight, and yet they break their backs for us. Simple threat is enough to bind them to our slightest will.'

'And no chains are needed, nor fence, Apostle,' said Arkula. His gaze moved outside the encompassing walls to a spread of desolation as featureless as the sky, except for the deep furrows of the quarries. Lines of rune-etched barrier stones flanked the causeway between the delving and the *Beneficta Diabola*, protecting a steady progression of naked figures dragging blocks of stones, or pulling empty sleds back to the quarry. Another ten-strong squad of Kalta-Ar's legionaries patrolled the crude road.

'Give them a little food and water and they are happy to endure the worst debasements of body and pride,' said Kalta-Ar. 'They are bred for subservience. As it was ordered by the gods on Colchis, so again will it be on Sicarus by the will of Lorgar Aurelian.'

Mention of the primarch's new capital world drew the eye of both warriors to the artificial mound beyond the far side of the growing temple-settlement. North, Kalta-Ar had dubbed it, for lack of any other means of navigating. The constructed hill was surrounded by its own perimeter of ward-runes, separated by less than a kilometre of open ground naked to the empyrean. At the summit, almost as high as the peaks of the cathedral-town's ward-needles, loomed a great archway of black and gold.

'When will the Urizen come?' asked Arkula. 'Apostle,' he added quickly.

'When the work is complete.'

A giant armoured in dark red hurried towards them up a nearby stone stair, his bolter in one hand. The pair awaited him at the top of the steps, where he halted, banging fist against his chest in salute.

'Dark Apostle, Brother Rigana is missing,' reported Isaikash.

Kalta-Ar's attention snapped to the half-built dormitories in the north-east quadrant where the named warrior was meant to be stationed.

'Missing?' said Arkula. 'Be more specific, brother-sergeant.'

'I cannot, brother-coryphaus,' said the legionary. 'He did not answer the hourly roll call and I investigated. He is not at his post, and I can find no sign of him. He is not answering any comms.'

'And there is still no sign of what happened to Hesta-Pek, Gesuat and Takla-Gad?' demanded Kalta-Ar. 'That is a total of four legionaries lost in the last twelve hours. This is unacceptable!'

'What can we do, brother-Apostle?' said Isaikash.

Kalta-Ar pulled out the wickedly serrated sacrificial dagger from his belt, its cruel blade shimmering without starlight or sun to reflect. He started down the steps and pointed the dagger towards the centre of the complex, at the original rites chamber where mouldering bones were heaped in pits to either side. A dance of wyrdflame lit the edges of the mystic circles within the open chamber.

'This is daemonsign. The wards must be faltering. Bring me another fifty slaves.'

Letting the corpse fall, its arterial spray spattering the ritual circle in which he stood, Kalta-Ar studied the witch-fire atop the ward pinnacles. He could see no difference to the wan green flames and the shifting aura that connected across the site. A quick survey of the blood-channels etched into the floor of the broad chamber found no blockages - glistening red meta-geometry surrounded him. He even inspected the runes carved into the blade itself, but there was not a mark upon the bloodied knife. The runes shimmered with warp power, coils of tenebrous energy floating from the razor edge.

He gestured for Arkula to bring the next sacrifice. The Word Bearer hauled one of the slaves to its feet by the wrist, almost pulling the limb from its joint. Only a murmur of pain came in response. Kalta-Ar took the wretch's chin between finger and thumb, turning the face one way and the other, looking for some sign of vitality. There was fear, but not much. The slave looked dead already for all the vigour it displayed.

'Perhaps we have made them too docile,' he remarked, slashing open the

slave's throat. Blood fountained across his armour as he tossed the rag doll of a carcass away. 'The gods thrive on pain and fear, ambition and despair.'

'They exist without hope, Apostle,' said Isaikash. 'With nothing to live for, perhaps their souls are too weak to please the gods.'

Kalta-Ar considered this as he beckoned for another.

'Did not the great Urizen and Kor Phaeron overturn the altars of the Covenant to punish their laggardly rituals?' said Arkula.

A scream cut across the vox, silencing any reply.

A scream, drawn out, agonised, no sound Kalta-Ar had ever expected to hear from a legionary. It lasted fully five seconds before abruptly ending.

The signal-ident of the transmission came from Brother Kai-Alak.

'Aakas, Hora, Apall-Af,' the Dark Apostle reeled off the names of the closest legionaries. 'Investigate! All brothers, stand at your guard, and watch the slaves.'

It took half a minute for the three legionaries to close in on Kai-Alak's last position. Kalta-Ar paced for the full thirty seconds, agitated.

'Kai-Alak is dead,' Hora told them over the vox.

'Dead, not missing?' Arkula demanded.

'Definitely dead,' said Aakas. *'You'd better see for yourself, Apostle.'*

* * *

The first element of the scene that drew Kalta-Ar was not the blood and body parts, or the broken pieces of armour scattered across the bare stone floor. It was the slaves. Seven of them, standing compliantly to one side, heads bowed but with their eyes fixed on the remains. Two questions immediately surfaced through the tumult of the Dark Apostle's thoughts.

'Why are they still alive, and why aren't they terrified?' he asked nobody in particular. Arkula attempted to answer but Kalta-Ar stopped him with a raised hand. 'I am not interested in your theories, coryphaus. Not yet. Let us observe a little more before we draw conclusions.'

The markings on the broken pieces of armour confirmed that the wearer had been Brother Kai-Alak. He had not only been dismembered and decapitated, but the rest of the remains had been utterly shredded.

'Gods...' muttered Isaikash.

'What have you found?' said Kalta-Ar.

'I was just thinking that we heard him screaming,' explained the legionary. 'He was alive for a while, feeling everything as this was done to him.'

'I think it cut off his arms and legs and then went to work on the rest of him,' added Arkula, with more relish than was entirely appropriate. He picked up half a helm, cloven neatly in twain. Brain matter and blood spilled onto the floor. 'It saved his head for last.'

'They must have seen what happened.' Hora pointed at the slaves, hammers and lever bars still in their hands. 'They were here when we arrived.'

Kalta-Ar approached the closest and looked down at its grimy face. He activated the external vocaliser of his war-plate, the volume dialled down for personal address.

'Did you see what did this?'

The slave nodded dumbly.

'Tell me what you saw.'

'A shadow, lord of lords,' said the slave. It moved a wisp of greying hair out of its face and gazed up into the Dark Apostle's helm lenses. 'A shadow picked him up and cut him to pieces.'

'It has to be a daemon,' said Apall-Af, his bolter pointing to the doorway and then the unglazed windows as if expecting attack. 'Something that came through the wards.'

'The wards are sound,' said Kalta-Ar.

'Perhaps somewhere on the peri—'

'The wards are sound!' Kalta-Ar calmed himself and regarded the slave, thoughts turning slowly into conclusions.

'What if it was a power that has already been summoned?' he considered aloud. 'Something being sustained and hidden *within* the wards already.'

'Sustained by whom?' asked Isaikash. 'The slaves?'

'Some kind of part, perhaps. Maybe they think it will save them. Why else would the daemon not attack them? Why take on an armoured legionary rather than these helpless thralls?'

'What have you done?' demanded Arkula, looming over the slaves. They moved away from him a little, but showed as little emotion as normal. 'What have you unleashed, you gods-damned cretins?'

They stared with vacuous gazes, either not comprehending his meaning, or unable to articulate their response.

'I want a full search of the entire complex.' Arkula thrust a finger towards the door. 'Every room, every hall, every cellar and vault. If they are hiding something, we will find it.'

'Wait,' ordered Kalta-Ar when the others started to move. 'There is another way.'

He held up the ritual blade and looked down at the slave he had spoken to.

'You are going to confess your wrongs, or you will know pain greater than anything you have lived through thus far.'

There was a spark of a reaction, a moment of fear.

'I know nothing, lord of lords,' said the slave. It backed away a step, holding up a hand. 'I tell you what I saw. The shadow, it tore apart your warrior. It threw him up and took him to pieces. I saw nothing else.'

The others started to chorus their affirmatives of this position.

'Enough of your lies, scum,' said Arkula. He slapped a hand back across the face of the nearest slave, slamming it into the rough wall. The skull cracked hard, leaving blood on the pale plaster.

Kalta-Ar had expected an outburst - cries of anger, of pain. Not one of the slaves even moved towards their injured companion. He saw that their attention was fixed not on the wounded slave, nor Arkula, nor the Dark Apostle. They looked at something behind and above him with a mixture of growing horror and disturbing smiles.

He turned quickly, pulling free his crozius. The other legionaries responded with him, bolters raised.

A thing like a shadow waited on top of the wall. It was impossible to make out its actual shape, though there seemed something vaguely humanoid about it. Before any command could leave the Dark Apostle's lips, it sprang upwards. Silhouetted against the ruddy sky, the shadow fragmented with an ear-splitting screech. Dozens of winged shapes fell upon the Word Bearers, beaks like plasteel blades slashing at their armour. Hora went down under the first flurry, losing an arm as he toppled, his war-plate scattering like pieces of torn paper.

'Fall back,' barked Arkula, his commander's instincts taking over in the face of the unnatural apparition. His tone brooked no argument and even Kalta-Ar found himself responding, retreating swiftly through the door.

Bolters roaring, the Word Bearers closed together and followed.

'Stop wasting your ammunition!' snapped Arkula. 'We have little enough as it is. Do you think bolt-rounds will stop this creature?'

The Word Bearers ceased firing. They darted looks towards Kalta-Ar as they closed around their Dark Apostle, seeking insight from their spiritual leader. He held up the sacrificial blade like a shield, smoke-like wisps of power curling across his gauntlet.

'It's in the eastern repository!' The shout over the vox came from Hasda on the other side of the settlement. A crackle of another transmission cut short, the only sound a strangled gurgle.

Bolter fire echoed from behind the Dark Apostle's group and they turned, weapons ready.

'Who is firing?' demanded Arkula. 'Reports, for all that is holy. Remember you are legionaries.'

'There's something moving through the first vaults.' Ghoa-Lok spoke hastily, his words coming fast in a flow of combat stimulants rather than panic. *'I think it's beneath—'*

'A black pool just swallowed Ghoa-Lok, coryphaus. We are falling back along the southern transitorum,' Sergeant Dario continued tersely between short gasps. *'There's something ahead of us. It's seeping through the walk of the southern annex. Like oil. We are turning north again, via the presidia.'*

'The slaves are att—' a desperate shout from Alekas alerted them to a fresh danger. Bolter fire rang out again and hoarse shouts replied.

'I think this daemon is not so powerful as it pretends,' said Arkula. 'Why does it try to attack us one at a time? Nothing conjured by these wretches could really be a threat to your power, Apostle.'

'You have a plan, coryphaus?'

'Do not fight with bolts and blades what we can overcome with faith,' said the second-in-command. 'It is a daemon, my brother. Banish it, or - better yet - bind it to your will. Turn it back upon the miserable curs that thought to trouble us with the detritus of their worthless prayers.'

'Apostle, the cathedral is not safe for us,' said Isaikash. He broke from the circle and headed towards the corridor on the other side of the chamber. 'If the daemon does not come for us, the slaves will.'

'You suggest that we run from unarmed scum?' Arkula snarled. 'We are not abandoning the *Beneficta Diabola*.'

'The grandest tower can be swallowed by enough grains of sand,' said

Kalta-Ar.

Though the idea of using one of the many binding rituals appealed, it took time for such ceremonies. He was not so dismissive of the daemon's power as Arkula either, knowing that all manner of powerful entities were jealous of the construction being raised in honour of the gods' most favoured son. A rival prince would need only the smallest opportunity to strike a blow in this fashion - a creature perhaps beyond his knowledge to control.

The Apostle drew his plasma pistol, though more from habit than any confidence it would be of use against the spectre that hunted them. 'A wise head rules the heart and knows when to concede to greater minds. We do not have the numbers to quell a slave revolt, nor the expertise to defeat this daemon-predator. We will withdraw to the portal bridge and seek the aid of the Urizen.'

The order was transmitted across the vox, though how many of Kalta-Ar's command remained he did not know. Scattered contact reports claimed the apparition was roaming the south-eastern chambers and passageways, which suited the Dark Apostle. His route lay north, though the speed with which the daemon had earlier relocated its manifestation forestalled any hope that they would progress entirely unmolested. The continuing, sporadic weapons-fire from across the half-built settlement also warned of the spreading slave rebellion.

Led by the Dark Apostle, they ran, heading directly for the north gate. They passed through halls lined with partially sculpted statues, the slaves that had laboured at the figures nowhere to be seen. A threatening silence punctuated by the thud of their boots, distant shouts, the retort of bolters and the hiss of dead vox-links replaced the tick-tap-tick-tap that had irritated Kalta-Ar.

Heading into an antechamber, the knot of Word Bearers came upon a surge of slaves spilling into the opposite doorway. Where before they had been dull-eyed mannequins, now their features were twisted with desperate anger. Frustration boiled into rage, Kalta-Ar's finger tightened on the trigger of his plasma pistol before he gave thought to the consequences. The ball of energy slammed into the closest slave, incinerating it from groin to throat, the burning remains hurled into its companions.

'Fists and blades!' roared Arkula, sprinting into the suddenly howling mob. The warrior crashed into the slaves, trampling the first under armoured

boots, lifting a second by the throat to dash its head against the wall.

The others followed swiftly on the commander's heels, armoured fingers breaking bone and pulverising flesh. Kalta-Ar slashed and stabbed with the sacrificial knife, panting with each blow. The ritual blade burned with inner light as the lifeforce of its victims seeped into the etched metal, the escaping soulstuff enriching the Dark Apostle with growing vigour. He grinned as he cut his way through the press, emerging from the back of the mob into an empty corridor. Around his brothers, bodies were piled against the walls, distended and distorted by inhuman blows.

Elation lasted only a moment. A tenebrous mass billowed through the antechamber, twitching the limbs and dead eyes of the slaves with its passage. Mouths with dozens of lightning-fangs opened in the cloud as it fell upon Apall-Af. It seemed as though an invisible blade punctured the Word Bearer's gut and lifted him, erupting through his backpack in a shower of ceramite splinters, shattered bone and blood spray. Armour plates fractured as maws sank their insubstantial teeth into the legionary, snapping limbs and rending bloody welts into the flesh within.

His agonised bellows blanketed the vox for a second until Karla-Ar cut the link. Arkula threw himself at the daemon, chainsword snarling. A bladed limb snared out, taking off his head with an almost contemptuous swipe.

'With me!' cried Kalta-Ar. The Dark Apostle turned and ran again, barrelling along the narrow passageways that led along the northern wall. He heard the thunder of his subordinates' footsteps just behind, the wheeze of powered armour pushed to its limits. He reasoned that if the daemon had been summoned within the boundary of the rune-shield, perhaps it might not be able to pass without.

Of course, that left them prey to the other warp denizens that haunted the locale, but the Dark Apostle was willing to risk an unknown threat to escape a very definite one.

He reached a circular window, its chiselled frame ready to accept metalwork in the form of the Eightfold Star of the gods. A guttural, wet noise from Aakas' vox betrayed his loss to the pursuing daemon just metres behind. The Dark Apostle changed direction, bounding up to the sill of the window. He did not look back as he plunged out into the ruddy gloom. A frisson of static washed through him, a sign that he had passed through the boundary wards.

Sparing not a glance behind, eyes fixed on the arch-tipped promontory ahead, Kalta-Ar pounded across the open ground. Every step was accompanied by the expectation of a semi-substantial claw sliding into his back, or the tell-tale flutter in his thoughts that warned of a daemonic gaze falling upon him.

He heard the exhalations of a rebreather and finally spared a look back.

Isaikash was just a few paces behind. Beyond him a scattering of other red-armoured figures emerged from doors and windows, sprinting across the featureless expanse. Of the apparition, there was no sign.

Kalta-Ar did not slow until he came to the angular ward-stones that circumscribed the summit of the hill. Within the ring, more Word Bearers oversaw the continuing labours of other slaves piling stones upon each other to raise a temple about the portal gate.

One wore an ornate suit of Terminator armour, its massive armour plates marked with the symbols of a first acolyte. The sigils were known to Kalta-Ar.

'Marduk!' he called out, scattering slaves from his path. 'Where is the Urizen?'

'Calm yourself, brother,' said Marduk, approaching the Dark Apostle with hand raised to halt him.

'You forget your rank, *first acolyte*,' growled Kalta-Ar, coming to a stop a few metres from Marduk. His brothers pounded into the arch-temple and turned, weapons trained back towards the *Beneficta Diabola*.

'I am here by the command of Masters Jarulek and Erebus, and I speak with their authority, Kalta-Ar.' Marduk's own guard gathered about him as he continued. 'What is the meaning of this intrusion?'

'Something powerful, summoned by the slaves, I think. A daemon of considerable wrath. It has already slain half of my company.'

An angry growl issued from the first acolyte as he raised a long-bladed chainsword. 'And you led it here, to our Lord's abode?'

While Marduk snapped commands to his warriors, Kalta-Ar found Isaikash among his brethren.

'How many are left?' he asked his fellow Word Bearer.

'Seventeen have made it to the mound, Apostle. I see no others on the plain.'

Kalta-Ar looked out across the expanse between the hill and the *Beneficta Diabola*. Here and there an armoured body sprawled on the ruddy ground. Dark mists formed close to the corpses, daemonstuff drawn by the escaping souls. Soon other things would come to feed.

'There, Apostle!' The shout came from the right, where Ukna-Tav pointed to the north-western comer of the site. A Word Bearer vaulted a low wall, a stream of naked humans flowing after. The legionary turned and fired his bolter, scything down the first handful of slaves to venture after him.

As he turned to continue for the mound, the ground beneath the Word Bearer darkened. Like tar bubbling from a pit, seeping blackness flowed up his legs, swiftly engulfing him to the waist. The legionary fired down into the morass but his bolts simply disappeared without exploding. The thick blackness continued upwards, rivulets of shadow that snaked along his arms and around his throat.

Growing, the umbra lifted the legionary from the ground, snapping an arm at the elbow, the bolter within his grip falling from the fingers. Kalta-Ar could not suppress an empathic wince as a leg contorted acutely, assuming an unnatural angle. The legionary's vox was clearly not functioning, and he was thankful they were spared more inhuman noises of painful death. Limb-snapping contortions wracked the armoured figure, almost tying the warrior into a knot, ceramite broken, bones shattered.

The daemon-shade dropped the remains to the floor and heaved itself together into the approximation of a human form, though twice as tall as the legionary it had just slain. Tenebrous wings flowed from its back as it advanced, arms ending in spear-like talons.

'What have you brought upon us?' Marduk's voice at his shoulder made Kalta-Ar turn, hearts racing. He dared only a glance at the first acolyte before returning his gaze to the spectre advancing with slow, grim purpose across the level plain.

'I had no choice,' said the Dark Apostle. 'It would have slain us all and come for you without warning.'

'Ah, so it was for our wellbeing, was it?'

'Look at it, brother! This is beyond us. We need the Urizen to face such a creature. You must call him.'

'Must?'

'This is not the time for your vanity, Marduk,' snapped Kalta-Ar. The threat

of being ripped to pieces by an unstoppable daemon outweighed any trepidation at offending one of the First Chaplain's favoured servants. He pointed to the dormant portal arch. 'Can you reach Lorgar?'

'The primarch has... higher concerns than your survival, Kalta-Ar.'

The bark of bolters drew their attention back to the ring of wardstones, where Kalta-Ar's warriors met the incoming apparition with a hail of fire. Bolt-rounds detonated across its form, but the fire of their fury disappeared into its darkness.

As it neared, the daemon fluctuated, its smoky exterior becoming like a blizzard, a creature of whiteness with two ebon-black eyes. Forks of black lightning leapt from an outstretched hand, rippling through the body of a Word Bearer. Greasy smoke issuing from rents in his war-plate, the legionary collapsed.

'We have to fall back across the portal bridge,' said Kalta-Ar. 'We must fetch Lorgar.'

'Fetch, Kalta-Ar?'

The voice came from behind them, as pure as molten gold in the Dark Apostle's soul. Its tones lifted his spirit in an instant, filling him with warmth.

He turned, as did the others around him. The archway glowed with power, showing a vista of a gigantic citadel-cathedral through the haze within its black frame. In front stood a gigantic figure, thrice the height of the legionaries, a golden-skinned entity wrapped in cloak and robe of flaming rune-shapes that swirled from its body. In one hand it held a wickedly spiked mace that throbbed with black power. The other bore a rod of intricately wound metal, tipped with a three-eyed skull layered with golden sigils that constantly weaved about each other. Eyes of uniform azure burrowed into Kalta-Ar.

'I heard your woe, my son.'

The voice washed through the Dark Apostle like a soothing balm, stilling his agitation, strengthening his resolve. Still, the presence of his primarch was near overwhelming and he fell to his knees, head bowed.

'My Lord Aurelian, forgive my weaknesses. A creature of daemonic spite has disrupted the great works here.'

'I see no daemon.'

Kalta-Ar glanced back towards his brothers. The entity that had pursued

them had reached the top of the hill amid a storm of bolter fire. It cast aside legionaries with sweeps of glittering claws, leaving tattered remains draped across the stonework of the outer shrine.

'This is no daemon.' Lorgar raised his rod, beckoning to the blood-stained whirlwind tearing through the last of the Dark Apostle's warriors. ***'Come to me. Brother.'***

With a last flurry of activity that turned another legionary to shards of ceramite and ribbons of flesh, the apparition coalesced into a recognisable figure. It was of equal height to the daemon primarch, clad in black battleplate with long-taloned gauntlets. A pair of wings stretched from its ornate backpack, fashioned as intricate metallic raven feathers. The face was as pale as snow, gaunt, with eyes as dark as coal, framed by shoulder-length black hair.

Kalta-Ar felt his breath dying in his lungs as he looked up at the unmistakeable features of Corvus Corax, the primarch of the Raven Guard. A flurry of questions flooded his thoughts but all remained unanswered as Corax spoke.

'What has happened to you, brother?'

'I have ascended,' said Lorgar. He indicated Corax with a twitch of his rod. ***'I might ask the same of you.'***

The Ravenlord strode forwards, intent on Lorgar Aurelian. Kalta-Ar and his warriors scattered before him, grateful to be free of his wrath. Marduk and his coterie closed about their primarch but a look sent them away.

'I am what I always have been,' said Corax. 'I am vengeance incarnate. I am justice delivered. This place, beyond the veil, has revealed what we all are. Underneath the veneer of humanity our father crafted for us, we are of the warp.'

'Have you come to make oath to the powers that are your true creator?'

'No. I swore to destroy all Chaos taint from the galaxy. You will be the first fallen brother to die beneath my blades.'

'I am not the creature you fought at Isstvan,' said Lorgar, raising his mace.

'Nor am I!'

Kalta-Ar barely followed the lunge of Corax, so swift it was. A black wind threw him aside as dark fire crackled from the rod of Lorgar. With a thunderous shockwave that hurled the Word Bearers to the ground, the two

demigods clashed.

* * *

After a long life of bloodshed and devotion to the True Gods there was little that awed Kalta-Ar. The sight of the two primarchs battling within the empyrean sphere left him shocked and breathless.

Infused with the raw primordial force, the combatants were ablaze with power. Corax seemed a towering storm wreathed in white lightning, the cloud formed of multitudinous ravens. Their cawing was deafening, the flash of their talons and beaks the spark of the tempest.

Into the shadow Lorgar rose like a fireball, alight with a tornado of burning rune shapes. Meteoric sigils rained down on the raven tempest, cleaving ember-edged furrows through the dense mass. They slammed into the buildings around the bridge-arch, shattering masonry, incinerating the corpses of Corax's victims.

The Ravenlord struck back, hails of flaring claws ripping the air itself, leaving rents through the rune-robe of the Urizen. Each stroke left a shriek in its aftermath that shredded the nerves as much as the talons shredded Lorgar's immaterial form.

Kalta-Ar flinched when the sweeping head of the Word Bearer's mace slammed into the chest of his storm-wreathed foe. The impact was greater than any thunderclap, levelling the walls around them.

Rolling to his back, shattered stone pouring from his armour, the Dark Apostle watched the titanic combatants soar past, Corax with a quartet of gleaming spear-talons driven through Lorgar's throat. The Urizen tried to lash out with his mace but was held close by the Ravenlord's inhuman grip.

Together they crashed to the ground, their impact flattening again the few Word Bearers that had regained their feet.

'The portal-bridge!'

Marduk's shout drew Kalta-Ar's attention to the wavering energy field within the archway. Dark sparks rippled across its fluctuating surface. It was visibly weakening.

'We cannot be trapped here,' declared the Dark Apostle stepping towards the waning portal.

'It is sustained by the Urizen's will,' declared Marduk, intercepting him. 'It

means our master is losing his power!'

The two primarchs had assumed fully humanoid form again in the heart of the crater their fall had made. Lorgar's left shoulder sagged, his rod swaying low in his grasp. Rune-shapes crawled across his form, no longer a robe of office but forming armoured plates etched with warp-symbols.

Corax flexed claws like sword blades, his expression pitiless as he took a step towards Lorgar.

Marduk opened fire.

The flare of his combi-bolter hit the Ravenlord in the chest and face, a welter of detonations that rocked his stride. Kalta-Ar fired his plasma pistol on instinct, the blast hitting Corax in the midriff, splashing cerulean energy across his ornate black war-plate.

Other fire joined it, missiles and more bolts from Marduk's guard.

Lorgar summoned a nimbus of power and threw out a shield of force that lifted Corax from his feet, buckling his wings in the unearthly hurricane. The Ravenlord became a flock once more of fire-eyed black birds, but the swell of Lorgar's will continued to hurl the other primarch's incarnations upwards, scattering them to the sky.

'Quickly, our lord,' shouted Marduk.

Lorgar lumbered towards them, his wounds streaming tiny crimson runes like blood.

Kalta-Ar looked up. The Ravenlord gathered again into a single mass, a dark comet headed directly for them.

The Urizen was first through the portal, his massive frame leaving a shadow of his passing as the other Word Bearers dashed through after. Kalta-Ar lunged the last few strides, throwing himself headlong into the miasma under the arch as chill shade swallowed him.

He found himself in a large chamber, colourful mosaic underfoot, the walls covered with fresh murals, white vaulted ceiling and domes far above. Part of the *Templum Inficio*. He had no time for his surroundings, eyes drawn back to the gate.

Shrieking, the raven flock scratched and pecked, but they could not pass the warp barrier.

Lorgar glared at the apparition on the far side, chest heaving as though out of breath, his head crowned with a halo of black warp fronds.

Corax assumed his mortal shape again, one cheek bloodied and bruised, his eye almost closed. There was much damage to his armour, but he leaned close to the portal, eyes boring through the divide.

'I have your scent now, Lorgar,' growled the Ravenlord. His face contorted with monstrous rage. 'I will find you, Lorgar! I will destroy you and every vessel you have filled with your taint!'

Lorgar staggered away and the portal arch fell dull, leaving only bare stone within its pillars.

'We can assemble a force and return, our lord,' said Marduk, hurrying after the primarch.

'All is not lost,' promised Kalta-Ar, not wishing to seem any less dedicated. 'I will rebuild the *Beneficta Diabola*.'

Their entreaties continued as they followed Lorgar through the corridors and halls, heading towards the centre of the grand construction spreading across their new capital on Sicarus. Stairs took them high, to the tower at the heart of everything. Black doors opened at Lorgar's approach and he strode within, no word uttered, no backward glance.

With a noise that echoed in Kalta-Ar's soul as much as his ears, the doors slammed shut, leaving him and Marduk on the threshold. There was no handle, no keyhole, nothing by which they might open the edifice.

A white Colchisian rune burned into life upon the door, and another.

'Deny fate,' read Kalta-Ar. He turned to the first acolyte. 'What does that mean?'

Marduk took several steps back and looked towards the pinnacle of the otherworldly tower. Golden fire burned from the summit.

Others were hurrying from the surrounding cloisters, demanding to know what had happened. Kalta-Ar recognised Kor Phaeron amongst them and suppressed a groan.

'What does this herald?' asked one of the approaching Word Bearers.

'We wait for his return,' replied Marduk. 'Until then, the great work must continue.'

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THE EMPEROR'S ARCHITECT

Guy Haley

OceanofPDF.com

There were dreams the Emperor had for all of mankind.

They were not the same dreams that his subjects had.

Olivier suffered through his least favourite nightmare. He looked on as iron giants slaughtered crowds of faceless people, whose abstracted forms suggested they were not human. They were angular, with pointed feet and hands, as if they were models folded from sheets of paper. But they were people. Their screams and their blood left no doubt of that.

Olivier was recording the event. How many paper people killed here, how many artfully slaughtered there. He wrote as fast as he could. For some ridiculous reason his pen was an antiquated quill, an actual feather, rather than the autoscribe he used in the course of his work. Paper spilled in an endless spool from his lap. He tried to record all he saw, racing across the paper to capture every nuance of the massacre. He couldn't. It was impossible, but he couldn't stop. There was something menacing behind him. Its disapproval of his work hung over him. Olivier sobbed; his handwriting became an illegible scrawl, he wrote so fast the pen split and his hand ached, but he could not get down what the presence desired. The paper people died in their droves, bludgeoned apart by steel fists. Their blood ran like ink.

The thing came closer. It meant him harm.

'Look at it - isn't it beautiful!'

He couldn't get it all down!

'Olivier, wake up!'

Olivier came awake with a jerk and a gasp. His wife's bland expression

greeted him, her mild eyes expressing query.

'Are you all right?' she asked.

Olivier wiped sweat from his face. 'I'm fine. I'm fine.'

'Nightmares?'

'I said I was fine, Marissa,' he said sharply.

She looked at him strangely. He didn't think she knew how much he had come to resent her, though he had tried his best to show her. That annoyed him too. Everything about her annoyed him.

'Look,' she said. 'We have arrived.' She pointed out of the viewport by their seats.

They were man and wife, Marissa and Olivier, bonded under his patronym of LeBon thirty long years ago. Life had been good to them. They were of high social class, better fed and cared for than the common man of the Imperium. Their status was such that even the transit yacht carrying them from voidship to world was luxurious.

Through armourglass dulled by the impacts of interplanetary dust, a planet was visible. Reflected light glowed from myriad lakes and snow caps. There was nothing that could be called an ocean. The almost contiguous landmass that covered the majority of the surface was predominantly green-brown and wrinkled all over with mountain ranges. If a planet were a human face, this one was an old woman. Olivier and Marissa had travelled to dozens of worlds. He had become inoculated against the marvels of planetary approach. Repetition rendered the wondrous banal.

Marissa retained her joy. Her childish wonder irritated her husband. Another thankless task awaited them on the surface, another pointless runaround trying to achieve the impossible, engaging with beings who did not care what they were trying to do. Olivier was sick of it all. But Marissa got more evangelical about their work with every frustrating assignment.

It was a great honour, that's what the Order of Remembrancers had told Olivier when he and Marissa were given their role. They weren't married then, and Olivier had believed his masters.

Biographers to the primarchs. There were a select few of their kind given that title. They had accepted proudly. After four decades of chasing demigods who did not want to speak with him, Olivier saw the pride of his younger self as hubris. He had wasted his life.

Marissa never lost her enthusiasm.

'Olympia!' she said with breathless awe. 'Home world of Perturabo, primarch of the Iron Warriors. See Olivier, it is a beautiful world. Beautiful.'

'Yes,' he said without conviction. 'Beautiful.'

For Marissa, a near holy duty drew closer. For Olivier, a punishment.

She kissed her aquila pendant when she thought he wasn't looking. The ship began its descent.

'The Emperor protects,' she whispered.

Consciousness builds in the developing brain scrap by scrap. Imagine the accretion disk around a star. Through time and gravity's influence a planet is born. Who could foresee the dust would make a world? The line between dust and planet is ill-defined. At what point does one state become another? When do the cells of a developing foetus change from a collection of individual living things into an aggregate that functions as an organ? At what moment does a new heart take its first beat? When do chemical reactions in a warm pool cease to be driven by external factors, and instead become self-perpetuating? When does chemistry become life? What is the line between each stage; what moment is the boundary to the instant before; what marks the boundary to the instant after? There are self-evident moments where something is one thing or another. But what of the moments between? How can these liminal stages be defined?

Such thoughts as these floated without anchor. One day they would inhabit the exceptional mind of a being who approached the divine, just then, they were scraps drawn to other scraps, making from themselves something greater, like a world from dust, or a child from cells, or life from elemental broth.

So is consciousness born.

Outside the being's body was only warm dark, and the mechanical rhythms of an artificial womb. There had been voices, and a presence that touched and moulded, but they were gone.

In the process of transition between two states, can the object changing be said to be either of the discrete objects it will be and has been? How many states exist between? An infinite shading, or infinitesimally small slices of differing existence?

The being felt the slow, greedy tug of a giant object so massive it bent space time around itself.

Gravity, thought the being. Gravity exerts influence. Influence effects change.

There was a shifting in the being's centre of mass. A shaking and a bouncing around the core of itself. The intrusion of outside stimuli defined for the being the shape of its body, and he knew that he was male. Before, he had not been aware of having a body at all. Now he was: four limbs, a torso, a head. Smooth skin felt vibrations through liquid and the heat it conveyed from beyond.

The being had considered all these things to be a part of himself. The increase of stimuli prompted him to divide himself from other things. Body, liquid, shell. That was his universe. The shell thrummed with stress harmonics. The liquid moved in sluggish tides.

High density alloy, he thought of the shell. He recognised its strength. He felt the same strength in himself.

Acceleration pressed him upwards. Articles that were not part of his body but which interfaced with it tugged at him. He was apart from his casing, but he was integrated with it, he realised.

He also realised, I am falling.

Sound returned as a dull rumble. Then a greater heat. Gravity pulled at him, acceleration pushed. A gaseous medium objected to his passage through it.

Atmosphere, he thought. Planet.

The descent lasted minutes, until terminating violently. The impact of his arrival boomed through his confined world. Light poured in through rents in his casing. The liquid that warmed and protected him rushed out.

Coughing violently, he discovered he had lungs.

In his few minutes of consciousness, the casing had gone from being part of him, to a protective externality, to a trap. Its dying machines wailed out their myriad malfunctions. The being ripped at the slippery tubes penetrating his skin, and fought his way free through the metal.

Cold air chilled him. White light blinded him. His body was as exceptional as his gathering mind, and rapidly adjusted itself to the change in environment.

He looked upon a rugged landscape.

Stone, he thought. Sedimentary formation. Mountain. Tectonic upheaval. Sky. Planetary atmospheric envelope. He knew the names and nature of all

things as he experienced them, as if a parent whispered the words in his ear the moment he set eyes upon them.

He rolled onto his back. Steam rose from his naked body. His casing, his conveyance, his womb, stood upright on the mountainside bleeding oily fluids. The silver skin was blackened, and yet the large numeral 'IV' stencilled on the side was still visible.

The being lay on the cold hard stone and stared at the machine.

What am I? thought the being. *Am I this number? Am I… four?*

He was not a number. He was adamant. He had a name. It came to him unbidden.

He clenched fists slick with amniotic gels, and stood on legs never used before.

'I am Perturabo,' he announced to the mountains.

Predictably, the primarch was not at Olympia.

Vox communications with the traffic control towers were confusing. They continued to be so long after their craft had landed. It transpired that they had arrived at the worst possible time; Dammekos, the Imperial governor and Perturabo's father, was recently dead, and the state was in upheaval. How they had managed not to hear this before landing was moot. The effects on their mission were disastrous. Olivier assumed Perturabo's adoptive sister, Calliphone, would inherit the office, but Olympian politics were anything but simple, and the LeBons were caught in the midst of ferocious disputes.

They sent data bursts containing all their documentation three times to three different authorities. Conversations devolved readily into arguments. Eventually, a representative of the Legion was called for. Their discussion with this human servant was terse, and promised nothing.

They were kept waiting for several hours. That was always how it began. They were never expected.

The LeBons stayed with their ship. Transit to and from orbit was necessarily controlled on most civilised planets, especially on Legion worlds. Under the circumstances, it was possible they might not be able to leave the space port. On the other hand, if they tried, the authorities might just let them disappear into the cities, where they would become someone else's problem. While they were at the port, they were a thorn, and thorns

were rarely left in situ. So they stayed and remained an intentional irritation.

'Someone will come to get rid of us,' he said. There was no need to say it; it was what had happened many times before Marissa had once respected him for his wiliness, until association with the Legions made all his qualities appear too anaemic. Men cannot compete with gods.

I am a small man, he thought, and I am too tired to grow further.

They waited at the foot of the voidship's single ramp. Gases burst from vents as the engines cooled. It was early evening, and the clouds of pollution coming off the space port were brown in the last of the light. A pale blue band of sky to the west backed silhouettes of mountains with sheared-off peaks. To the east, stars struggled out through the brume.

All space ports had similarities. They had open plains of hard standing divided into landing fields and aprons. They housed all kinds of craft. Short range vessels like theirs were nearly always grouped with surface to orbit lighters and purely atmospheric vehicles away from the serious business of transportation. Elsewhere giant lifters, troop ships and cargo haulers, bigger than buildings, crowded the artificial plains. Too big, really, to fit into the human mind. Their existence was undeniable, but the idea that they might fly brought on Olivier's vertigo. Like the mountains ringing the port, the ships seemed part of the landscape, not conveyances.

Space ports differed in the detail, most notably in what had been done to the landscape in order to accommodate them. The Dammekos Space Port was particularly dramatic. Olympia had virtually no flat land, so a mountain range had been cleared to provide it. Mountains were levelled, and their rubble used to fill the valleys between. Two peaks had survived in altered form, carved into gigantic statues of Legiones Astartes standing guard at the entrance to the space port.

'He's over-compensating.' Olivier nodded towards the colossi. They were marvellously realised, set in action poses full of motion and dynamism. 'Hundreds of millions of tonnes of stone balanced so they do not fall. And look, they are fortifications as well as adornments. Cannons for eyes. How quaint,' he said.

Marissa took exception to his sarcasm in her aggravatingly serene way. 'They are amazing artworks.'

'Are they? Doesn't it look to you like he's trying too hard?'

'You should have a little more respect,' she said.

You have too much, he thought.

'Be cheerful. We have a new book to write, a new adventure!' she said. 'Think of all we're going to learn about Perturabo. We shall write the official history of his life. There is no greater honour than that.'

I don't want that honour any more, he thought. 'This is not what I imagined spending my life doing,' he said instead.

'You should be glad. Do you remember Fulgrim?'

Olivier nodded. 'He was the only one that spared us an adequate amount of time.'

'He understood why this is so important,' said Marissa. 'It could happen again.'

He glanced at her. 'I don't think so.'

'Then tell me what you think, my dear husband. You tell me so little these days.' Was that a flash of annoyance with him? He hoped so; it excused his own petulance.

Olivier took a sharp, nasal breath. 'Fulgrim was vain. He was too eager to tell us how marvellous he was. Like a child, showing off all his precious things.'

'You can't liken the primarchs to children!' she said.

But they are children, he thought. He remembered Fulgrim's preening self-satisfaction. For all his supposed perfection he had seemed desperate they see it too, and praise him. He was superficial. Olivier became distant as he remembered the meeting.

His moments of distance occurred more and more often.

'Are you listening to me?' she asked.

Often he answered her mentally. To reveal what he truly thought would lead to argument. He forgot that no one but him heard his internal remarks. He had left her waiting again. He supposed he must have looked rude.

'Olivier!'

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I'm tired.'

'You're irritable!' Marissa laughed. The noise grated. 'My husband, you cannot have it both ways. You are annoyed when our subjects are unforthcoming. You are annoyed when they speak with us. You must have liked some of them.'

'I liked Vulkan. He was no nonsense. Right-headed.'

'We had barely an hour with him.'

'It was enough,' he said. Maybe it wasn't sufficient to write an accurate book - though when had they ever written one of those? - but it was more than sufficient for Olivier. He couldn't have survived another five minutes under the regard of those burning red eyes. Vulkan was otherwise a ponderous fellow, overly serious.

'What of Dorn? Did you like him?'

'No,' he said. 'How could you like any of them? The primarchs might be awesome beings, but they are awful people.'

'They are not there to be liked.'

'What are they for then? To be worshipped?' he said harshly.

She looked stung. That had bitten close to home.

'Olivier, I do not know what misery has hold of you. We have had a marvellous life. We have collaborated on five of these books.'

Five tomes of half-baked supposition, he thought, arduous yet fruitless research and tedious speculation presented as fact. Lorgar had refused point blank to see them. Leman Russ hadn't even allowed them to set foot on Fenris. He didn't have it in him to be involved with a sixth.

'And though some have been hard,' she went on, 'we have met with some of the most marvellous people in the galaxy, perhaps ever to have lived.'

She took his hand. He tried not to flinch. He did not like her touching him any longer.

'Surely you can be happy with that?' she said.

Happy? He thought. Happy to spend my life presented to beings who could crush me without a thought. Beings who speak with us only as an indulgence. Beings who you, my once dear wife, worship?

He felt inadequate. What man can judge his own achievements well when set against those of the primarchs? The statues at the space port were a case in point. Olivier could never do anything like that. The Lord of Iron's abilities were on another plane altogether. Was it any surprise at all that these gods would not speak with them? He and Marissa were ants before them.

Marissa squeezed his hand. He glanced at her. Her skin was loose. Her eyes were lost within the folds around them. She had been beautiful once. He had loved her then.

'You are happy, aren't you?'

He hadn't been happy for a long time. He made an equivocal noise. She seemed satisfied with that.

'Look,' he said. He used the distraction as an excuse to extricate his hand. He pointed. 'A Land Speeder in the Legion colours. Someone's coming for us.'

The shepherds were pursuing Perturabo when the jalpida came upon them. In the shepherds Perturabo saw echoes of himself, but he was different to them. He knew that even then. He thought about it while he jogged ahead of them.

They knew nothing about him. They only wanted to kill the strange feral boy whose teeth were reddened with the blood of their flocks, and whose limbs were clad in stolen skins.

He outpaced them easily, springing up the sheer slopes as easily as the caprids he poached. His agility seemed to worry them. His superior eyes could read their tiny faces from far away. They were afraid, but they still came after him. He admired that.

His pursuers were falling behind when Perturabo heard the first screams. He continued on, heading ever upwards towards the reaches where the shepherds could not easily go. Sure of sanctuary in the cold, thin air, he grinned. The screams grew quieter the further up he went.

He was about to reach a ridge that would hide him from sight, when he hesitated. The cries of the shepherds were getting desperate.

He turned back to look.

Down the slope, the shepherds were under attack by a feathered serpent fifteen metres long. Its body was thick, coming up to the human waist. Its fanged maw was wide enough to swallow a man whole. The mouth was closed protectively around a bundle. Its neck was distended. Curious, Perturabo waited until the snake swung around so he could see what it had, and glimpsed the head and shoulders of a boy protruding from the mouth. He was being drawn inch by inch down into the snake's gullet and would soon be swallowed. The other shepherds beat the snake with sticks and stabbed hopelessly at it with their long knives. They were agitated, upset. The serpent would not release the boy.

Why did they not retreat? The creature had its meal. It would not give it up, and while it had the boy, it would not eat them. They had no weapons

that could hurt it, but continued their fruitless attacks regardless, putting themselves in harm's way. It was illogical.

Perturabo intended to go. To his surprise he found he, too, wished to stop the beast and save the boy. He wondered at this instinct to go to the shepherds' aid. He began to descend, then stopped. His rapidly maturing brain calculated the likelihood of victory. He did not find the result to his liking.

The serpent rippled, putting on a startling turn of speed and outpacing the shepherds. The brush of its hide knocked the men down, and it was away over the rocks.

One shepherd wailed louder than the rest as the beast carried off its prize. He caught sight of the young primarch, and cried out in a language Perturabo had never learned, but which he understood.

'Help us!' he wailed. 'Help us!'

Perturabo's half-formed mind judged the shepherd. Was he weak, or was he deserving of help?

He thought on this for a full minute.

Perturabo turned away, and headed back for the ridge.

The LeBons' liaison was a giant slab of genetically altered meat encased in armour, and in that he was a typical example of the Emperor's enhanced warriors. His face was squat and bullish to the point of inhumanity, with a neck so thick his head appeared to be an extension of his shoulders, and a brow that looked borrowed from Olympia's cliffs. Olivier had assumed that spending time with the Legions would make their members easier to distinguish, but he had found the contrary to be true. He had given up trying to see the differences between them, and had come to rely on the markings they wore on their battleplate.

This one was called Krashkalix. He was a sub-captain of the IV Legion.

Krashkalix opted to sit with them in the Speeder's cramped transport compartment.

'I apologise that you were kept waiting, and that the primarch is not here.' Krashkalix was forced to shout over the teeth-rattling thrum of gravity impellers holding the vehicle aloft. The mountainous terrain made for shocking turbulence, and the machine bounced through it. 'He was called away to the Sak'Trada deeps several months ago. The Great Crusade waits

for no one.'

'We understand,' Marissa shouted back. 'We meet with the primarchs if we can, but we understand their duty to the Emperor supersedes all other considerations.'

This satisfied Krashkalix. 'As it should.'

Olivier disagreed, but could have left it there. He did not.

'Our lives are a constant chase after your genefathers,' he said. 'They are never where they are supposed to be, and if they are, they never have time for us.'

He's going to frown, thought Olivier to himself. Space Marines often frowned. Their capacity for expression was severely limited.

Krashkalix frowned.

There we go, thought Olivier. He gained a sort of weary satisfaction from being right.

'We are, in short,' Olivier continued before the Space Marine's inevitable objection to his words, 'frequently disappointed.'

'I am sorry, but we fight for the Imperium, for the whole future of mankind,' said Krashkalix.

'There's a war on?' offered Olivier.

'You mock me,' said the Space Marine stolidly. 'I understand you too have your duties to perform. You were not forgotten. Perturabo himself ordered me to meet with you as soon as you arrived. He regrets he cannot speak with you personally. Truthfully. You come at a difficult time. The satrap Dammekos died not a month ago. There have been problems establishing who should take his place as governor. We Iron Warriors are few here. We prefer not to become involved in politics, yet we have no choice. The situation is tense.'

The news that they had not been forgotten made Olivier think of the statues, and of Fulgrim. Another vain one then, he decided.

'You are right that we all have our duties to perform,' said Olivier. 'If conquering the galaxy seems hard, then ours is merely impossible.'

'Regrettably the future of mankind must have priority over the past,' said Krashkalix. 'Maintaining stability in the present is task enough.'

Olivier shrugged. 'If you say so.'

'I apologise for my husband.'

Krashkalix looked at them both. 'You are pair bonded?'

'It was inevitable, we spend so much time together.' Marissa patted Olivier's hand.

The Space Marine looked neither impressed nor disinterested, but kept his expression of bovine indifference.

'I must disagree with you a little, sub-captain. The past is important,' Marissa said, 'because if we don't know where we have come from, how can we value what we have?'

'These are not the concerns of the Iron Warriors. We are conquerors. We erase pasts, but it is not my place to question the wisdom of the Emperor's servants,' said Krashkalix, though the way he said it suggested to Olivier that he clearly did question it. The LeBons were used to this, the unwilling babysitter spouting apologies and platitudes through gritted teeth. Olivier wondered if escorting remembrancers was a punishment detail. If it was, what had Krashkalix done?

'As the primarch is not here, what do you wish to do?' said Krashkalix. 'If there is anything I can enable for you so that you might accomplish your task more quickly—'

And stop being a nuisance to me, Olivier added to himself.

'—then you need but ask. You have the authority of the Sigillite himself. I am bound to obey.'

But I'm not happy about it, Olivier thought, adding the subtext.

'Thank you, sub-captain,' said Marissa brightly. 'We'll do what we usually do in these sorts of circumstances.'

To wit, every time we have written one of these damned books, thought Olivier.

'We shall gather information and begin to compile notes for the biography,' said Marissa. 'The interview with the primarch can wait until his return. To begin with, it would be appropriate to visit places of importance from his youth. We have of course begun our research, but I find visiting the sites to be most useful.'

'You do not wish to acquaint yourselves with recent information?' asked the sub-captain.

'We could speak with his family. I had hoped for an audience with Dammekos, but his sister still lives,' said Olivier. 'Perhaps she will speak with us?'

Again, the frown. 'Relations between Governor-elect Calliphone and the

Legion are currently poor. The royal family may not consent, and I cannot command them.'

'Then we shall speak with them in good time. We will probably be here for several years,' said Marissa.

'That's how long it usually takes,' said Olivier offhandedly.

'I am a linear thinker,' continued Marissa. 'I like to begin at the beginning. Sites from his youth to start with.'

'Very well,' said Krashkalix. 'The Legion has arranged accommodadon in Lochos. You may spend the evening refreshing yourselves, and regarding the many improvements my lord has made to the capital. Then tomorrow I shall take you to the place where my father first arrived on this world.'

Perturabo knew what he needed without being told. His growing mind was a library full of books he had yet to read. He had only to think on a matter and information welled up inside him. Sometimes it stayed only a short while before sinking back into the depths of his subconscious, but more of it remained within his grasp with every passing day. As his mind grew, so did his body. The raw skins he had taken no longer covered him, so he saw that he was getting larger. If he went back to it he would no longer fit within the vessel that had borne him to the world of mountains, caprids and men.

He smelt what he needed on the air, scenting it like a hound from kilometres away, a hard smell, rich with possibility. Fire, and metal.

For the first time, he descended past the treeline on the mountain, and headed for the green valleys where men dwelled in numbers.

He followed the smell into a village. A ringing sound beat out steadily as a heart. He zeroed in on it, clambering over walls, pushing his way through hedges, moving in a straight line towards his goal. A crowd of children playing in a field saw him first. He glowered at them, and they ran screaming.

By the time he reached the village, the alarm had gone up. It was a small place, twenty households of hard highland families set around a paved square on the round shoulder of the mountain. He found a road, and walked that, his bare feet planted firmly upon the uneven cobbles. There was a crowd in the square when he arrived. They did not dare stop him as he walked towards the forge.

The smith was engrossed in his work, and only looked up when Perturabo

pushed his way within. The smithy was enclosed, a red and black world of secrets. The smith was a powerful man, thickly muscled and wise in his arts. Perturabo was as powerfully built as he. The smith knew not to protest.

Perturabo looked around, knowing the names of the tools and the items as he set eyes on them.

'Give me iron. Give me charcoal. High grade, long burn. Give me tools. Give me them now,' he said. He extrapolated the words he must say from the limited exposure he had had to the shepherds' speech. What left his mouth was tangled, but comprehensible. It was the first time he had ever spoken with another human being.

The blacksmith did as Perturabo asked. Authority cloaked the young primarch. Fear did the rest.

For hours Perturabo laboured in the forge, crafting an artefact he had never beheld, but whose shape was carried in his soul. The knowledge to work the metal, to beat iron into steel, to temper and to hone came to him as instinctively as the shape. In the beginning, the blacksmith held back, though he would not leave his domain. In the end, he came forward to assist. Those were superstitious times. The gods were prayed to and honoured, but never evident. Here was the proof of their being. Only an emissary of the gods could be so strange, and appear so mysteriously, and work the smith's magic despite being so feral.

Perturabo allowed the smith to help.

The whole day passed before the work was done. At its conclusion Perturabo held up a plain, iron sword to his face and sighted along the edge. It was the first sword he had ever seen. He grunted in satisfaction, and turned to go. He had said nothing since his initial demands.

'Who are you?' asked the blacksmith in wonder.

Perturabo paused at the threshold of the smithy.

'I am Perturabo,' said the boy.

Outside, nervous men waited in silence, their useless weapons held in trembling hands. Perturabo walked by them, and they let him go.

The supposed site of Perturabo's arrival at Olympia was a cold, wind-blasted place marked by a simple cairn of stones. Olivier wondered why there were not greater monuments there, because it had become abundantly clear that Perturabo liked monuments. There were monuments in Lochos,

there were monuments on mountain tops. There were monuments at the sides of roads. Many of them depicted legionaries of the Iron Warriors, both as individual, helmless heroes and as faceless representations of the Legion as a whole. But there were just as many statues of Perturabo. Krashkalix proudly stated that many were the work of the primarch himself.

There was nothing so remarkable about the landing site.

The Speeder hung off the mountainside, engines buzzing noisily. One of the many faces of the huge, blocky mountain garbed in ice that looked out of the Chaldicean uplands, the slope was a bare few degrees from qualifying as a cliff. There was nothing alive there. Olivier found it hard to breathe. No sign of human habitation was visible, not even the ubiquitous ancient mines and quarries that scarred Olympia. They had overflown many of them. What at first appeared to be natural formations turned out to be vast workings from the Dark Age of Technology. But not on that mountain. Perturabo had arrived in a pristine environment. It was cold, bleak and woeful to the human soul. Nobody could possibly go up there of their own volition.

'What a sad place,' Olivier muttered.

'It was definitely here?' asked Marissa.

Krashkalix looked discomfited. 'Probable location. By the time the primarch returned to the site, his pod had been removed. Even so high as this, a prize like that would have been spotted and plundered. Olympia is without accessible deposits of many minerals, those having been mined out millennia ago.'

'Could he not be sure?' asked Olivier. 'Most of the primarchs have prodigious memories.'

Again, Krashkalix offered a variation on a frown that expressed awkwardness. 'As does my lord, but he does not remember much of his earliest days on this world. His memory begins with his climbing the Phrygean cliffs near Lochos. The legends of the Chaldicean mountain folk inform what we know of his earliest days. There was a falling star. A strange child was spotted in the mountains shortly after. He killed some of their livestock and was to be hunted, until he slew a jalpida and other local predators. After that they thought him a gift from the gods of the day, and he moved from village to village, crafting wonders and slaying the beasts that preyed on them.'

'Gods no one believes in any more,' said Olivier.

'In accordance with the Imperial Truth,' said Krashkalix. 'No.'

Marissa made copious notes and set to work with her picter. Olivier couldn't raise the interest. Naked stone and a probable landing zone provided few facts. He watched Marissa warily. She should know better than to attach any significance to this place. An avian cawed. Flying level with Olivier's eyes only thirty metres away, there was over a kilometre of empty space beneath its belly. Looking down past the bird made his head spin.

'There's not much to see here,' said Olivier. 'Let's move on.'

Krashkalix nodded. 'There is a commemorative museum not far from here. There is more for you there.'

'Just a minute more!' Marissa said. She bustled about, taking picts and making sketches.

Olivier waited impatiently while she finished. Krashkalix stared off over the distance-misted forests, lakes and rock of Olympia. He was not at all bothered by the cold.

'The city was as impressive as you said,' Olivier said to him. He was hoping to draw out Krashkalix a little. Architecture was not what he wished to learn about.

'My lord Perturabo has many great talents. His wish, when this war is done, is to turn them over to peaceful matters.'

'I heard some call him the Emperor's Architect,' said Olivier.

Krashkalix's frown made a reappearance. 'It is not his preferred title, nor is warsmith, warlord or siege master. None of them encompass the entirety of his skills.'

'But he is a fine architect,' said Olivier.

'Yes.'

Olivier waited a moment. 'I heard shouting, in the streets last night,' he said.

Krashkalix turned to look at him and blinked slowly.

'It sounded like a protest,' Olivier went on.

'There are elements in the populace who object to the demands of supplying the Legion,' said Krashkalix. 'They have become more vocal following the demise of Dammekos.'

'I don't see many young people here on Olympia. The city seemed

somewhat empty.'

'The Emperor's wars take their toll on all worlds. Olympia is no exception,' said Krashkalix.

'What will be done with the protestors?'

'They will be punished,' said Krashkalix. He would not be drawn any further, and Olivier went back to slowly freezing to death.

By the time Marissa finished, he was shivering.

Over her wind-reddened cheeks, Marissa's eyes were alight with possibilities. She was crafting Perturabo's story already, weaving another web of lies in her mind.

'Where to next?' she asked Krashkalix.

'The forge of the first sword,' he said. At the legionary's command the Speeder drifted close enough to the rock face that they could step aboard.

Perturabo walked into the shepherds' farmstead carrying the head of the serpent in his arms like an infant. A collection of crude huts and broken-down fencing, the farm made the village with the forge seem grand.

The primarch was covered in blood, and the sword swung naked at his hip. The shepherds had seen him coming. They waited inside, peering fearfully from glassless windows.

Perturabo threw the head down onto the dusty ground outside the main dwelling, and waited.

The door creaked open. A man came out. Perturabo thought he was the shepherd who had cried out for his aid. He could not be sure. His memories would not settle; they were in constant competition with the knowledge swimming around in his mind and were unseated by it before they could take root. The knowledge was an affliction as much as it was a gift. He hoped the shepherd was the right man. The head was for him.

The shepherd looked at the trophy.

'You killed the jalpida.'

'I did,' said Perturabo.

'You have taken seven of my flock.'

Perturabo stared at him impassively.

'But this has taken far more,' said the man. 'And it took my son. You have avenged him.'

'I have.'

'What is the price?'

Perturabo frowned.

'What do you want?' said the shepherd. 'For the service. Everything has a price.'

Perturabo's quick mind analysed the shepherd's speech patterns, refining his own command of the language as he spoke.

'I do not want anything.'

The shepherd was confused. 'Then why did you help us?'

Perturabo thought. 'It was right. You are weak, I am strong.'

'You have come to protect us.' The man looked hopeful. It was a piteous expression.

The young primarch stared at the shepherd, then gave a single, hesitant nod. 'Yes. That is what I am for. To protect, and to improve.'

Another sentiment crossed the shepherd's face. It was an expression Perturabo was to learn to despise in the coming years. All Olympians, no matter how humble, were skilled in exploiting situations to their advantage. If he had known that then, he would have turned and walked back into the high peaks and dealt no more with men.

'We are poor,' said the shepherd. 'There are many beasts in these mountains that feast on our caprids. Some attack us and take our children, as you have seen. We cannot slay them. Can you?'

Perturabo waited. Encouraged by his silence, the man continued.

'A hydraka lairs not far from here.' He pointed to the north-west, where pinnacles of rock crowded out the sky. 'Three valleys over, near an outcrop like a horned head. We dare not graze in that territory, as the hydraka kills everything. There are many good pastures there, but we cannot use them.'

'It hurts you?'

'Yes.'

'Then I will kill it,' said Perturabo.

The shepherd looked almost regretful. Perhaps he did not expect such swift agreement; perhaps he had realised the strange boy might die on behalf of his greed. Whatever his misgivings, his attempts to dissuade Perturabo were half-hearted. 'The hydraka are powerful, and cunning. They are like the jalpidae, but with many heads. You must cut quickly to destroy it, for they heal blade wounds fast. It will disarm you. It will kill you.'

'It will not,' said Perturabo certainly.

He left the village. That night, he feasted on jalpida flesh, not knowing it was poisonous to mortal men. It did him no harm.

The next day he set out towards the outcrop. As he made his way down the path from the high peaks where he slept, he found a bundle wedged under a rock. Curious, he opened it out, and discovered a suit of clothes like those the shepherds wore cut for his muscular youth's body. The workmanship was inadequate. Perturabo saw a myriad ways it could be bettered. He improved the suit before discarding his skins and donning it.

On the way to the valley of the hydraka, he stopped to cut himself a wooden club from the heartwood of a tree. The shepherd was right. The hydraka healed his sword cuts quickly, and it wrenched his blade from his hand with a venomous mouth and cast it aside, but when Perturabo crushed three of its five skulls with his club it died just the same.

The heads he delivered to the same farmstead, and the next day more gifts were left out for him. Food, and utensils - a bowl, spoon, knives and more. He had none of these things before, but the moment he saw them he knew what they were and he recognised their work as inferior. He abandoned the gifts, and made his own.

A week later, a storm of rising knowledge dislodged his memories, and he forgot that any of this had happened.

Six months after that, he found himself clinging to the Phrygean cliffs, and his life began in earnest.

The Speeder took the LeBons to a small town high in the mountains. Modern buildings clinging to sheer rock defined the majority of its streets, but the centre was an unevenly paved square atop a knoll in the narrow space between where one cliff ended and another began. The square was old, and the buildings around it also, made of rough stone long before the Emperor had come to Olympia. A primitive smithy stood slightly away from the rest of the buildings. Smoke drifted from its chimney.

An idealised statue of Perturabo occupied the square's middle. Cast in gold, the primarch stood over an anvil, his smith's hammer raised to strike. The masonry of the statue pediment was flawless. The artistry was sublime. So much gold - on impoverished Olympia it was worth an incalculable amount.

In style and wealth, the monument was a ridiculous contrast to its

surroundings.

A simple flap of hide divided the forge from the outside world. Krashkalix made straight for it and held the curtain open for the remembrancers. Heat washed out. A smith was at work within.

'In here,' said Krashkalix.

'A shrine?' said Olivier incredulously.

'A museum,' Krashkalix corrected him.

'It looks like a shrine to me,' said Olivier. 'We've seen this before, near worship of the Emperor's sons by their legionaries. We don't want that, we want the truth.'

'Hush, Olivier,' said Marissa.

'I will not be quiet when I see the Imperial Truth ignored.'

Krashkalix looked at the floor. The Legions did revere their genefathers. Olivier was convinced it would one day lead to trouble.

'Worshipfulness is not why I brought you. You wanted to speak with people connected to the primarch. You wanted to speak with people who are honest.'

'Yes,' said Olivier. 'We did.' He looked around the small town. Like Lochos, it was underpopulated. The few people who had come out to see the strangers were old.

'The resident smith is Geradamos, the grandson of Andos.'

'Andos? As in, Perturabo's foster-brother? What's he doing here?' asked Olivier in surprise.

'Why don't we ask him, dear husband?' said Marissa, and went inside.

Olivier took a deep breath of cold air. Krashkalix stopped him before he could go in.

'Be careful repeating what he says. Geradamos is not afraid to speak his mind. He speaks the truth, mostly, but it is an unfortunate version of the truth.'

'And he is allowed to?' said Olivier.

'He is our gene-lord's kin,' said the Space Marine. 'I said we prefer not to become involved in politics.'

Olivier followed his wife into the broiling interior. Krashkalix came last, stooping low to clear the lintel. The hide flap fell, cutting out the glare of the day and leaving them in ruddy dark.

The blacksmith was twisting wire around a bundle of iron rods to hold

them together. Then he set a modern machine that worked a set of bellows going and thrust the bundle into the fire and spent a long time adjusting its position while it heated through. He ignored the LeBons and their escort for five minutes while he did this. Eventually, as Olivier's patience was running out, he spoke.

'I won't speak with him here.' The blacksmith didn't look up from his work.

'I'm sorry?' said Olivier.

'The legionary, he has to go. Whatever you want, I won't talk with him in here.'

'How do you know we want to talk? We could just be visiting. Surely you have visitors.'

'Not many. Not as many as Perturabo would like.' Gerademos pulled the bundle, now glowing orange, from the fire and set it on his anvil. 'The Speeder,' he said. 'There're only a few Speeders about. And you have one of *them* escorting you. You're off-worlders, high rankers. You want something all right. I won't talk in front of him.'

Olivier looked at Krashkalix. The sub-captain employed the obligatory Legiones Astartes frown, nodded, and left.

'I assume you've come here to talk about the primarch.' With three taps to sight his aim, Gerademos began to beat the softened metal, his blows welding the iron bars into one piece.

'Assumptions are unreliable,' said Olivier. Marissa gave him a serene look. It was a rebuke nonetheless.

'They take all the best,' he said, between striking the metal. 'Not only the boys for the Legion, but nearly all of the young. They take them for the fleet, and the shipyards and for the auxiliaries and they leave the dregs behind. But just because I haven't been chosen does not qualify me as an idiot,' said the smith. The metal sang under his attentions. 'You're here to talk about the primarch. You're not the first.'

'Then tell us about him,' said Marissa.

'Why should I? I have no love for Perturabo.' He spoke openly, without fear. Gerademos pushed the iron back into the fire. Creaking leather pumped by gleaming technology breathed life into the coals, and the heat intensified. After a few moments, the smith took out the metal and recommenced the welding in silence.

Olivier looked over at Marissa. Her role in their partnership was to break

down the barriers their subjects erected around themselves. It wasn't something that had been assigned, but an easy practice they had fallen into during their long marriage. He enjoyed watching her talent at work. They still had that. There wasn't much else.

Marissa moved around the cramped forge, looking at this or that, though never once touching. She stopped before a pile of what Olivier at first took to be scrap bronze, but when he looked closely, he saw that there were traces of magnificence clinging to it.

Marissa pointed at the mangled metal. 'This must have been marvellous. Is this the work of your ancestor? What happened to it?'

'That? That is not the work of my grandfather. Perturabo made it with his own hand.' Steam whooshed around Geradeмos as he plunged the metal into the quenching barrel. 'And by his own hand he destroyed it.'

'Why?' asked Olivier.

Geradeмos thrust the metal back into the fire. Cherry glow lit his face. Ruby coals reflected in his eyes as he leant against the sill of the coal bed. He was tense; he didn't want them there. He turned around.

'I tell you what. I will tell you of my ancestor, Andos, who grew up with the primarch, and lost everything to him. You can draw whatever conclusions from that you like. Then you're leaving.'

'Thank you,' said Marissa warmly. 'That seems fair.'

'Andos was a noble man,' Geradeмos began. 'He was kind and thoughtful - indeed, he was so different to the rest of Dammekos' kin there were whispers he was a foreign seed sprouted in the poison soil of that house.'

'Is it true?' asked Olivier.

'No. I myself have been gene-typed to settle the matter. Dammekos was my great-grandfather.'

'Then you could be rich,' said Olivier.

'Rich?' Geradeмos smiled humourlessly. 'I would have nothing to do with him. He was as bad as his foster-child,' said the smith angrily. 'Andos was a great craftsman. Were it not for Perturabo, he would have been the genius of this age. There was little art or craft he could not turn his hand to, nothing he could not make beautiful. None could surpass him, except Perturabo. Do you think Dammekos, his own father, saw that? He did not. Dammekos was bedazzled by Perturabo, and what service the foreign youth could do for him.'

Geradamos pulled out the iron and commenced working it with his hammer. Between ringing strikes he continued his story.

'But Perturabo did see Andos' worth, and it made him seethe. He goaded Andos constantly into competition, vying with him to see who could make the most marvellous art or fashion the finest weapon. Everyone knew Perturabo exceeded Andos in every way, none more so than Andos himself, but the mere possibility that anyone, even his own adoptive brother, could better Perturabo's talents, stoked his rage. Perturabo always had an excess of rage. So Perturabo contested with Andos, and beat him, and contested with him again, and beat him, and each time he exulted in his triumph. It was pathetic, like a ten year-old crowing that he has outmatched his three year-old brother in the wrestling ring.'

'This does not accord with the official accounts of his life,' said Marissa.

A hard strike sent a fan of sparks from the iron. Geradamos held up the iron in his tongs and peered at it critically. It was taking on the shape of a sword. The metal cooled to a dull ruby, and he thrust it back into the coals. The bellows began their pumping once more.

'Of course it doesn't. Perturabo wrote the official accounts. Before the Emperor came, he presented a face to the world that he thought of as calm and commanding, but was in truth sullen. He hid his envies, though not all of his rages. This story was told to me by my father, who heard it from my grandfather. You want a true account of the primarch, you won't get a better one than this.

'One day, Perturabo challenged Andos yet again. By this time my grandfather's patience had run out. He had come to middle-age, and had withdrawn to his workshops. He had no desire to prove anything to anyone, only to continue his business in the shadow of the Warlord of Lochos as best he could. Perturabo would not let him be. He pushed and pushed, demanding another matching of skill. Andos' own temper was slow to kindle, but it finally caught as any man's eventually will, and so he took Perturabo's challenge. They were to make statues of Shashal of Drast - he's one of our culture's heroes,' he said sourly. 'Yet another bloody murdering tyrant. We have an addiction to them.

'This time, Andos strove harder than he ever had before. He put all his talent into that statue. Perturabo finished well before, but Andos would not hurry. Weeks went by. Perturabo's ego was soothed by what he thought of

as another victory. That is, until Andos was done and the statues were set side by side, and unveiled.'

The smith took the metal from the fire, and began again to beat upon it, speaking between strikes.

'Perturabo's statue of Shashal was perfect in every way. There was not a single flaw. In composition it was arresting. As a depiction of the human form it was a marvel. Shashal looked like he might step down from his pedestal at any moment, that he would breathe and live as a revenant in bronze. The people of the court were moved to tears.'

'So why did he destroy it?' asked Marissa.

Geradamos snorted a bitter laugh. 'Because there was a problem, and for Perturabo it was a very big problem.' Geradamos' hammer rang off the metal. 'Andos' statue was better. A lot better. Perturabo's was technically period all right, but Andos somehow trapped the man's soul in bronze. When viewed from different angles, the statue revealed another facet of Shashal's character. Andos depicted pathos and tragedy. Through subtle means he told the story of Shashal's life in that one, single figure. Compared to Andos' statue, Perturabo's looked hollow. The way they tell it, there was never a finer piece of art made on Olympia, and Perturabo knew it. His face went grey. But he congratulated my grandfather, and the court gave Andos high honours. They were going to set the statues side by side above the Kephalon gate at Lochos in honour of both men. That never happened.'

'Because Perturabo destroyed them both,' said Marissa.

The hammer clanged again many times before Geradamos answered. 'You catch on quick,' he said. 'He obliterated Andos' statue completely. Of course, no one said anything about it. It went unremarked upon like all the rest of Perturabo's petty rages. His own statue he smashed into that mangle you see there, but he was careful to leave enough of it so that its artfulness can still be glimpsed. One of our noble lord's more subtle lessons for us. Andos and Perturabo never spoke again. Grandfather let himself age naturally, and died nearly ninety years ago. Such a waste of a talent, gone while his parasitic sister and father ruled over us.' He shook his head angrily. 'Andos had something Perturabo never had.'

'What is this thing?' asked Marissa.

Geradamos grunted. 'Humanity.'

The blade went into the fire for a minute. He repositioned it carefully,

watched the way it absorbed the heat. Marissa waited while he worked, allowing him to calm.

'I have a final question for you, Gerademos,' she said.

'You want to know why I work here, when this place is so closely associated with the primarch?' he said. 'It's remote, for one thing. I'm freer to talk here than I am in the cities. Don't let the statue outside fool you - only off-worlders come here. The legionaries are always on campaign, and the rest of us Olympians don't care. I don't get many visitors, and I like it that way. This smithy was a human place, for human art. By working here, I reclaim it for our own kind. Perturabo's memory is a stain on this place. Perturabo protests he has the good interests of the people at heart, but he's insecure, paranoid as the worst of the satraps. Most here don't like him, but they respect him, and if they don't respect him, they fear him. I don't respect, fear or like the damn *kiritoi*,' he employed a strong Olympian curse. 'If I ever even begin to feel any of those things for him, I look at the remains of that statue in the corner there. It reminds me that it isn't possible to make the perfect man. There's always a flaw. Andos was the better man, because he was a man. No Emperor made him in a jar. Perturabo is a monster.'

He thrust the metal into the quenching barrel. Steam wreathed him. He pulled it out. The metal had taken on a gentle curve.

'Ah, it's a scythe, not a sword,' said Olivier.

'Why would I make a sword?' said Gerademos. 'Don't you think we've had enough of war?' He threw his hammer into a barrel of tools and picked up a whetstone. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got work to do.' He turned from them, making it clear he would say no more.

'Fascinating,' said Olivier, as they passed the monument on the way back to the Speeder. 'A great insight. I'm surprised he hasn't been silenced speaking like that.' He pitched his voice low to avoid drawing in Krashkalix, who walked several paces behind them.

'Some worlds are more tolerant of dissent than others,' said Marissa.

'I don't think this is one of those worlds,' said Olivier. 'There's him, the protests we heard. Something's going on here. Perhaps we could explore this story further, and get to the bottom of it?' He glanced back at the Space Marine, but Krashkalix showed no sign of having heard.

'No. That's enough. We can't include it,' said Marissa.

'We should,' Olivier said coldly. 'It's the truth.'

'Truth or not, you know we can't,' she said firmly.

'I wish to show you what the Lord of Iron is to his sons.'

That was what Krashkalix said to them in the morning, before he flew them out of Lochos to a castella in the mountains.

Direct viewing of legionary helmet-feed usually brought on Olivier's vertigo, so he took an anti-nausea pill before the immersion helm was placed over his head. The device was made for a legionary, and it took Krashkalix some effort to adjust the internal webbing and pad out the interior so that it fit.

A stream of numbers detailing date, time and location rushed past Olivier's eyes, and he was plunged into the middle of ferocious battle. Despite being prepared for it, he jumped at the sudden noise.

The images had been captured by an Iron Warrior's autosenses. Everything the warrior had seen, Olivier now saw. It was like looking through another man's eyes. The pict-feed behind the Space Marine's visor had been used, and the footage captured the helm plate display as well as the tumult outside.

Energy bolts cracked past the legionary's helm. The view swung about wildly as the warrior pelted up a narrow corridor walled with seamless, rippled stone with the texture and shine of glass. The warrior threw himself into cover, raised his gun and snapped off four quick shots from his bolter. The image shook with the recoil. Multiple cannon turrets raked the way in return. Between the emplacements, Olivier caught sight of the Iron Warriors' foes: black-robed thralls, supported by cybernetic slave warriors toting energy cannons bonded to their shoulders. Line troopers bearing missile launchers came to the fore, unleashing rockets at the turrets and falling back. The guns disappeared in a cacophony of bangs. Smoke filled the corridor. Enemy fire petered out for a moment, and Olivier took a premature breath of relief.

A massive explosion shook the image. The view jerked all over the place. Olivier had a fleeting view of an airless sky beyond an armourglass roof as the legionary fell backwards. The warrior recovered quickly, and ran forward again, passing the broken, silver bodies of other Iron Warriors lying between piles of smoking stone-glass. The warrior's breathing rasped in

Olivier's ears. An alarm beeped repetitively. Some part of the legionary's armour was damaged. The warrior muttered to his battleplate machine-spirit, rerouting power from one part to another, and the alarm ceased. He did all this while firing. He did not miss.

The focus and ability of the Legiones Astartes chilled Olivier every time he witnessed it.

The warrior kicked down a howling fanatic brandishing a warhammer equipped with multiple chainsword-like tooth tracks. Suddenly there were dozens of black-robed men everywhere, attacking suicidally. Olivier's host cut them down by the dozen. They were small, feeble as all men are compared to an armoured legionary, but their fervour carried them forward. Olivier saw an Iron Warrior fall, his armour cracked open by repeated blows of the fanatics. His host mowed them down with a burst of automatic fire. He turned back to see the whirring head of a bludgeon slam into his face.

The view fizzed. The pict-capture cut out.

Olivier drew a shaky breath, and reached up to remove the immersion device.

'Wait,' said Krashkalix, his voice intruding into the blackness. 'There is more.'

A new file began to play. Again, a set of data flicked on and off, too fast for Olivier to see, and another vision of combat burst into life.

A cyber slave reared up before the Space Marine. Olivier did not know if he was viewing the feed of the same warrior or if that Space Marine had died and this was another. The warrior's opponent looked similar to the servitors used all over the Imperium, but its expression said it knew full well what had been done to it, and had been driven mad in the process. The technology attached to the man was sophisticated, although it had been integrated with his body without any care for his pain.

A blurring vibroblade attached to the cyber-slave's hand cut across at the Iron Warrior. He dodged back and blasted out the chest of his foe. Blood sprayed all over the Space Marine and ran down his vision slit, staining the view. He fought on unhindered, putting down three more of the constructs.

Orders crackled in his ears, and he jogged onwards, falling into formation with other Iron Warriors. They ran through a brightly lit operating chamber. Its cleanliness only accentuated the cruelty of the instruments hanging over

vivisection tables. Dead legionaries and cyber constructs lay upon the tiled floor in pools of blood.

They ran into a tunnel lined by murky glass suspension jars, where dismembered bodies floated and twitched. There was a moment of quiet, and then a tremendous screaming that cut out, and the sounds of battle once more boomed loudly as the ad hoc squad ran into a massive hall enclosed by a ribbed roof. Hundreds of the cyber slaves were arrayed there. Behind them were war machines, big as legionary Dreadnoughts and festooned with deadly weaponry.

'The Black Judges,' whispered Olivier. Stories of their reign of terror had reached as far as the Throneworld. Seeing them so close sent a shiver of fear through him.

Masses of Iron Warriors were engaged with the erstwhile masters of the Meratara cluster. Perturabo's warriors had come in through the western walls, advancing up long halls, taking shelter from raking energy beams behind piles of their own dead. The casualties, Olivier had read, had been horrendous at every stage of the campaign.

For all their might, the Black Judges were losing.

At the centre was Perturabo, flanked by his Tyranthikos Terminators. Corposant and residual teleport mist still wisped from their armour. They had arrived only seconds before.

As Olivier's host ran into the room, Perturabo was concluding the slaying of one of the judges. He yanked his hand out from the smooth domed front of the vehicle, dragging an ancient human from the interior by the throat. Life support fluid burst from the rent Perturabo had pounded into the casing. Dead wires and tubes ripped from the man's body as Perturabo held him high and throttled the life from him. Lights flickered all over the war suit, and it collapsed to the ground.

Seeing one of their masters die, the cyberslaves went into a frenzied attack. Perturabo opened fire on them, shooting through the body of the dead Black Judge until the bloody tatters fell from his fist.

The primarch's wrist mounted cannons blasted swathes of death into the horde. The ammo feeds running from the back of the primarch's bespoke Terminator armour shook as they fed an endless stream of rounds into his guns, but Perturabo did not fire indiscriminately. He switched from target to target with preternatural speed, felling each foe with a single headshot at a

rate too fast for the human eye to follow.

Olivier lost sight of Perturabo for a moment. A musical discharge of purple energy rocked the unnamed Space Marine sideways. A dead Iron Warrior wheeled overhead, black against violet lightning. The view righted, and the warrior ran on to his primarch, firing all the time until his weapon ran dry. He ejected a clip and snapped a fresh one home without breaking stride.

'Iron within, iron without!' the Space Marines shouted as they crashed, shoulder first, into the mass of horrors around the Lord of Iron.

The enemy was the stuff of nightmares, an anatomist's collection of flayed specimens brought back to screaming life. Skinless bodies served as carriages for heavy weaponry. Agonised eyes rolled, lidless in bleeding skulls. All of them were shrieking like the damned from some backward religion. Their suffering poisoned Olivier's soul. Over them loomed the giant war suits of the Black Judges themselves, the great monsters of popular legend, a living testimony to how far into evil humanity could fall. They differed in form to one another, but all were deadly. The weapons of the Dark Age of Technology were theirs to command.

A Terminator died to the blinding white stab of a neutron beam. The warrior whose feed Olivier watched reeled back, his helm alarms tripped by radioactive backwash.

Perturabo crashed bodily into a Black Judge. The machines stood tall over their altered human slaves, but Perturabo was as big as they, and his shoulder barge sent his target staggering backwards. He opened fire with both of his wrist cannons, driving the machine further back. It staggered, stamping its own warriors into a paste as it struggled to remain on its feet. But the rounds could not penetrate its armoured skin, and its multiple weapons mounts swivelled to bear upon the primarch. Olivier knew all this was history - the campaign had taken place well over a century ago - but seeing it then was like living it, and he feared for the primarch's life.

A missile on a column of smoke slammed into the Black Judge's side, denting it. A second punched a neat round hole in the skin. A yellow flash preceded a gushing slurry of macerated flesh and life-support fluids that poured from the breach.

'The Havocs have arrived,' said Olivier's host. It was strange to hear his voice. He was calm, collected, even as he was slowly cooked by the

ambient radiation around the Black Judges. 'Press forward. Iron within.'

'Iron without!'

Several insane cyber-constructs attacked Olivier's legionary. When the warrior looked again to his primarch, Perturabo was surrounded by the fiery blooms of missile explosions. Ruby las-blasts cut all around him, sectioning the air with a laser grid. Perturabo had pulled a giant hammer from his side. In one hand, he gripped the weapon arm of a war machine the other swung his maul down hard into his assailant. The judge bore a bladed scourge that wrapped around Perturabo's arm, moving with a life of its own.

A searing light blasted Olivier's warrior to the side. His suit systems shorted out, dazzling Olivier with a confusing display of static and half-formed images.

Darkness fell again.

Krashkalix pulled the immersion helm from Olivier's head. Olivier blinked dazedly. The sight of Perturabo surrounded by violence as he brandished his hammer would not leave him. He looked to where Marissa sat, her own immersion helm in her lap. A look of holy joy suffused her. That, more than anything he had seen in the record, appalled him.

'If you were seeking to shock me, sub-captain, it won't work.' Olivier got shakily to his feet.

'That was not my intention,' said the Space Marine. 'I wished to show you our lord as we know him, in the midst of battle.'

'He is no less daunting a figure to me now.'

An Iron Warriors serf brought Olivier a glass of water. He gulped it down greedily. His head ached from the helmet.

'Why should he be?' said Krashkalix. 'War is an awful thing. He was made to fight it.' He leaned forward. 'You seem less than respectful of my genefather. The Black Judges were evil men. They sucked the life from others to prolong their own. To do so, they held sway over this entire region of space, bringing their terror even as far as Olympia. In the mountains, the Lord of Iron slew serpents. In space, he toppled ancient evils - they were but the first of many. He works to do so now, against the hrud. Perturabo is no monster, but the slayer of monsters. He is your protector, remembrancer. You should honour him.'

Olivier gave Krashkalix a grave look. 'I shall be the judge of whom I should honour.'

Krashkalix stood up to his full height and glared at Olivier. The remembrancer regretted his poor choice of words.

'Tomorrow, we shall see more.'

Olivier felt he had seen quite enough already.

Olivier stood up from the floor and yawned. Documents describing every one of Perturabo's campaigns were heaped around their hospitium suite.

'He decimated his Legion. The way he makes war is so wasteful. He throws his men away.' He picked up a book and let it fall: Perturabo's *History of Olympia*. 'You have to wonder why he does it, why he revels in the image he has, this unbreakable, uncaring rock of a man. He's shoving his ruthlessness into people's faces.' He put his face into his hands and ground the heels of his palms into his eyes. 'He's stage-managed his entire life. There's no truth here, only the posturing of an egomaniac. It's no wonder the people are rioting. We should leave. We should go back to Terra, and tell the institute that we can't finish the book. This is the worst assignment yet.' Marissa fell quiet. There were people in the streets again. Olivier heard them chanting in the distance. Their defiance was alluring.

'It doesn't matter.'

'What?' he said. He took his hands away from his eyes and looked up. Coloured spots danced in his vision.

'It doesn't matter,' she repeated. 'Fact is not the same as truth.'

'You're talking nonsense. We've had this out before. Why do you insist on coming back to this? We are here to write a history.'

'Our job is to present the subjects as the heroes they are. No great general is without fault. Not one.'

'What we write is the historical record!' said Olivier. His temper was rising. 'This is too important to fall prey to… to…'

'Worship?' she said. The truth is more important than the facts,' she said quietly.

Olivier's tiredness retreated. Irritation drove it out. 'That's not biography, that's hagiography.'

'Maybe that is what the Imperium needs.'

'The Imperium needs the facts,' he said. 'I won't be part of myth making.'

She looked up at him. 'Don't you see, Olivier? The primarchs transcend the truth. They're not people. Does the galaxy need to know the flaws in the

Lord of Iron's character? Can't you see highlighting his shortcomings will undermine all that he has achieved? A book like you propose will never be published, and it shouldn't be.'

'That doesn't matter!' he said. 'The truth matters.'

'We don't have the truth, Olivier. We don't need it. We're the keepers of modern legends. These books, these eighteen books, they're the beginning of a new scripture.' Her eyes gleamed. The double-headed eagle pendant was displayed openly on the outside of her dress.

'Is that the real meaning of the Imperial Truth?' he said scornfully. 'Have you cast in your lot with the religious who whisper the Emperor is a god?'

'The Emperor is a god,' she said fervently.

'I can't believe you're saying this.' But he could; all the signs were there. He'd ignored them for far too long.

'The Emperor Protects, Olivier,' she said. Her mask of serenity had fallen, and she looked upset, desperate even. The chanting in the city was coming closer. It grew abruptly louder. The mob had turned a corner and was marching down their road.

He backed away from her. 'He doesn't. He can't! Look at what's happening outside, and answer honestly, has He protected people from Perturabo's ego? When did you betray all we set out to do?'

'What we set out to do betrays the Emperor. History isn't important. Finding the transcendental truth is what matters. The… the purity of vision… the quintessence of—'

'Divinity?' Olivier whispered.

They stared at each other, strangers at last. The noise grew louder and louder, passing under the windows of the hospitium. The protesters were shouting in Olympian. Olivier could read the language but had not yet mastered it, and he could not understand what they were saying.

The shrieking thrum of Legion jetbikes raced from one end of the street to the next. Olivier ducked in shock. The crowd howled in fear.

More jetbikes roared by on a level with the LeBons' apartment, their passing shaking the windows. After came the noise of heavier aircraft engines labouring to land. Something big came very close to their accommodation. Their furniture vibrated across the floor. A lumen fell and shattered upon the parquet. If Olivier had anything to say to Marissa, he would not have been heard. He cowered. She stared at him without making

any sign she was aware of the din outside.

The chanting on the street changed in tone. All semblance of words was lost. The crowd's voice had become an inchoate roar under the scream of thrusters. Glass shattered somewhere nearby.

The engines cut out. A ramp clanged down.

Guns barked. People screamed. The thunderous drumming of thousands of people running together shook the hospitium. So many screams at once. Olivier crept to the edge of the blind and peered out of the side of the window, fearful of being seen. The mob had moved on, leaving placards and rubbish behind among bodies broken to pieces by mass-reactive rounds. Stragglers raced up the street. He couldn't see the legionaries. A fire had started in the building opposite.

After years of cynical detachment, he felt a sudden roaring anger take hold of him.

'This is what your legend brings you. Oppression, and rebellion,' he gestured out of the window. 'What will this mean for the people of Olympia? I cannot imagine Perturabo will be forgiving.'

Marissa was close to tears. 'It is necessary. It is all for our good.' She held up her amulet. 'The Emperor protects! Please, Olivier, you have to see!'

He was disgusted with her. 'It's all a stupid dream,' he said. 'The Imperium, peace, all of it.' He stared out at the deserted street. 'All dreams end, Marissa.' He sighed. A sense of enormous sadness threatened to drown him. 'I cannot go where you are going.' He let the blind drop. He couldn't look her in the face for fear he might strike her. He wondered what to do. Fury made the choice for him. 'I'm leaving. I'd rather take my chances out there than wallow in your hypocrisy. Goodbye.'

'Olivier!' she called.

By then he had already walked out of their apartment door, and was heading down the marble stairs. He passed through the deserted lobby, and out onto the street. Smoke was rolling across the road. The dark shapes of powered-armoured legionaries advanced through it.

He ran from them, glancing behind him all the while, until almost by accident he joined the crowd as the Olympians rallied. At first he was scared, but he was swamped, subsumed within them. He could not escape, so he sank into their fury as if into a warm bath. Years of resentment boiled out of him, at Marissa, and the hollow promises of the Imperium. If it had

just been her, a broken heart would have been the only cost. But it was not just her. Too many worlds laboured under the yoke of compliance, liberated from their past masters in name only, while the populace inched closer towards worshipful submission.

Olivier was swept along by the people of Lochos, up towards the shining palace that occupied the highest tier of the city's topography. They spilled into the main square. More aircraft were coming into the city bounds, but they no longer landed unopposed. There was fighting in the streets. The snap-crackle of lasgun discharges responded to the booming of boltguns.

A woman came onto the balcony. Olivier supposed she must be Calliphone, the primarch's sister. He expected her to speak calming words, to soothe the crowd and tell them to go home. Perhaps the Iron Warriors also expected her to defuse the situation, for they held back.

She did not.

She declared Olympia free.

A moment after she gave her blessing to rebellion, a cohort of Iron Warriors advanced into the square, and opened fire. Human soldiery in the uniform of Lochos responded from the buildings all around the public space. The Iron Warriors were massively outnumbered. Incredibly, it seemed to Olivier, they began to fall.

Caught in the crossfire the crowd ran again. Olivier fled with them, an animal desire to survive the only thought in his mind. He sprinted from the square as bodies exploded into scraps all around him, leaving the tatters of an impossible dream behind forever.

Marissa sat immobile, staring at the doorway her husband had left through. She was sure she would never see him again. The crowds were chanting louder than before, their anger echoing all through the warren of streets that made up Lochos. Firelight shone brightly across the road.

A sigh broke her inactivity. She got up, and opened a drawer to which only she had the key. With careful hands, she pulled out a cloth-wrapped bundle and laid it upon the table.

She spoke a short prayer for protection as she folded back the silk, revealing a book. She bowed her head in respect and opened the cover.

She read aloud from the *Lectitio Divinitatus* as the explosions of open revolt rocked the city.

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PRINCE OF BLOOD

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'I am in blood. Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.'
- attributed to the Nameless Thane of Old Albia

The flagship was trying to kill them. There could be no other explanation.

Blearily, Lotara eyed the canteen that rested upon the arm of her command throne, thirst making her tongue fat and heavy in her mouth. She shook the tiny silver pillbox in her hand absently, and her last few analgesic tabs rattled within it. Her headache was a sharp, grinding reminder that she hadn't taken any liquid in nearly two days.

And, of course, she had nothing to wash the painkillers down.

The *Conqueror* was surely trying to kill them.

Her ship. Angron's ship.

Angron's prison.

Her first officer circled around behind the raised dais. Where once Ivar Tobin had been a model example of the Legions' naval officer class, now he would regularly pace the deck with the nervous agitation of an addict, his brow dull with dry, cold sweat.

He halted abruptly, covering his earpiece with one hand. 'The door is sealed from the inside, ma'am. They are sending for a cutter. Still no contact with Mistress Andrasta, or her attendants.'

Lotara frowned. Her thoughts continued to drift.

The bridge space felt stiflingly warm, though that was likely just another effect of the dehydration. The crew preferred to keep the lighting low, because the lumen sconces had begun to flicker randomly and buzz like

angry hornets, and even the most void-seasoned among them could not last a whole watch without suffering migraines or waking nightmares. Lotara herself had ordered the air cycler vents blocked up, in an effort to keep out the slaughterhouse reek that clung to every fibre of their uniforms. In a space designed for three hundred souls and more, barely sixty had reported for duty that night, and many of them were red-eyed and stripped down to their stained fatigues. A few were sprawled at their posts, sleeping fitfully.

There was little she could do about that, beyond hauling them down to the brig one by one with her own two weary hands, and hammering on the doors of every bunk-room to find suitable replacements. All of her slavers - no, *discipline masters*, she corrected herself - were engaged elsewhere on the ship. The *Conqueror* had to keep moving, and her engines were thirstier even than her crew.

Tobin straightened, staring blankly past his commanding officer like a grimy parade-ground recruit. It was his new way of reminding her of her duty, her superior rank, without actually saying a word, and it irritated her immensely.

'Ma'am… You might ask the good captain to intervene,' he offered. 'Send a legionary or two down to the Navigator's chambers, perhaps? We're losing pace with the *Trisagion* and the rest of the Word Bearers fleet, and Lord Aurelian's patience is not without its limits.' Tobin paused just long enough to make it seem as though he might be waiting for an answer, then addressed the warrior directly. 'My lord, what say you?'

Kharn was the only legionary on the bridge, though that was nothing unusual. He stood, as he so often did, in the open space to the left of the dais, swaying slightly and pressing at his temples with raw knuckles. Lotara knew that his headaches were far more fierce than hers could ever be, worse still when they sailed the tides of the warp as the fleet did now, and nothing whatsoever to do with the amount of water in his bloodstream. She didn't remember him coming through the main doors, but he'd clearly been in the process of shedding his battleplate when the pain had driven him to start roaming the corridors of the flagship once again. The warrior's left arm was bare, and his right gauntlet hung from his belt.

He murmured a reply from between clenched teeth. He did not open his eyes, nor turn to face them, but continued to knead his scalp.

Tobin raised an eyebrow. 'My lord?'

'They called my father the Lord of the Red Sands…' he repeated, more loudly. A spasm flickered in his bicep, the outward sign of some deeper neural twitch.

Lotara glared at him. She attempted to swallow three times before she could actually manage to croak a reply.

'We all did.'

She rarely bothered to address him by name or rank any more. He didn't seem to notice.

'He was the Undefeated,' Kharn continued. 'His triumph rope grew long. He became the Slaughterer of Nations. The Eater of Cities, and then of Worlds, with us at his side. Some even dared to know him as 'the Red Angel'.'

As if in response the ship creaked and juddered. It was like a leviathan stirring in its sleep, drifting on the unseen currents of the aether beyond the shuttered viewports. Lotara rose unsteadily to her feet, sparing a concerned glance for the static-crazed oculus high overhead. She often felt that she did not know whether her once prized vessel was still ev—

Kharn whirled around, catching her in mid-step and making Tobin flinch. His face was contorted almost into the likeness of the Sarum-pattern helm he so favoured.

'Those are not his names!' he hissed, his eyes flashing in the dim light, and she could smell his rancid, unwashed transhuman stink. 'None of them. My father's name is Angron. That is all he has left.'

An awkwardly long moment passed between them. Kharn held the sleeve of Lotara's dress tunic with one increasingly shaky hand, but she kept his gaze. Tobin continued to stare past them both, pretending he couldn't see any of it.

Then the legionary's eyes fell to the Red Hand emblazoned on her chest - the untidy print that he himself had made in honour of her exemplary service, what now felt like a lifetime ago. His resolve seemed to melt away, and he turned his back on her once more.

'You should just drink it,' he muttered. 'You'll hardly even notice the taste after a while.'

She made to smooth out the wrinkles in her uniform, but found that she couldn't see any point. Instead, she picked up the canteen, unscrewed the top, and poured the contents out onto the deck.

'I won't do that, Kharn. You know I won't do that.'

It was blood.

In some grim parody of the ancient Terran faiths, the *Conqueror* turned every drop of water they could reclaim into thick, sticky, slowly clotting blood.

The warriors of the Legion seemed content to gulp it down when they had no alternative - especially the primarch's Devourers - though it heightened their manias, their rages and rivalries, and led to more deaths than usual in the fighting pits.

But it simply made the human crew sick. Of course it made them sick, even those most keen to impress their legionary masters. It was *blood*…

Was this what Angron wanted? It was impossible for anyone, even Kharn, to say.

Lotara's gorge rose, and she realised she was becoming dizzy with the effort of standing. She let the canteen slip from her fingers, still gently shaking the tiny pillbox in her other hand, and trying to think of something to say about the separation between men and beasts. But the words simply wouldn't come together in her foggy thoughts.

And that was when the warp rejected them.

Kharn evidently noticed something amiss in the split second before it happened, his head snapping around as he dropped into a reflexive, guarded crouch.

Then Lotara felt it - the dislocating reverse-yawn of an unexpected warp translation, *the instant drawn out into eternity but crushed back to an instant against its will, the cold slither of the warp retreating from the hull, Geller fields straining with the almost infinite deceleration between the immaterium and reality…*

The deck lurched. Sirens and alarms sounded. Lotara reeled, but kept her footing even in the slick of spilled blood. The older Tobin was not so nimble, and their skulls cracked together as he tripped over the corner of the dais. She fell, bright motes swimming at the corners of her vision, letting out a pained gasp an instant before her shoulder hit the metal-plated floor.

To their credit, and dazed as they were, the helm officers managed to bring the slewing motion of the stricken *Conqueror* under control as it tumbled back into real space.

His combat reflexes still heightened, Kharn glanced down at her.

He cocked his head. 'What—'

Another vessel, perhaps the escort frigate *Metzgerei*, slammed into the flagship's aft quarter.

The *Conqueror* howled in pain.

Kharn was hurled from his feet by the impact. Lotara saw him collide head first with the standing crystal-flex pane of a fighter-patrol tactical display, shattering it instantly. Tobin went skidding in the same direction across the deck, and tumbled down into the starboard sensorium bay.

The lumens blinked out across the bridge. The acrid stench of an unseen electrical fire quickly filled the air. Servitors spewed garbled half-words, their machine brains moving a few milliseconds faster than their augmitters could manage. Someone was screaming. A secondary explosion rocked the hull, probably a detonation in one of the lesser magazines.

Decompression warning beacons strobed in the enclosed space. The ship's superstructure groaned as it shrugged off the collision and limped clear of the growing debris field.

Lotara's ears were ringing. She couldn't tell where the deck alarms ended and her tinnitus began but, thankfully enough, it was drowning out the screams. Rolling onto all fours, smearing her uniform red in the process, she managed to scan the space around the command throne.

Her mouth fell open.

It was Kharn. He was on his knees.

He was screaming.

With one hand the captain clutched at the ruin of his face; it was little more than a wet, crimson flap hanging from his left eye socket to the open slash of his mouth. Teeth, gums and cheekbone glinted back from the bloody mess, under the bridge's emergency lighting.

With the other hand, he gripped what was left of Ivar Tobin by the neck.

In his insensible agony, Kharn had torn the man apart.

They called my father the Lord of the Red Sands. For a time, they loved him.

He was the Undefeated. His triumph rope grew long. He became the Slaughterer of Nations. The Eater of Cities, and then of Worlds, with us at his side. Some even dared to know him as 'the Red Angel'…

But those are not his names. None of them. He was little more than a slave

who became a butcher, but a butcher who was crowned a primarch, and a primarch who was turned into a monster.

In spite of it all, we loved him too. For a time.

My father's name is Angron. In these increasingly rare moments of clarity, between the blood-rages and the infinities of pain that seem to burn his skull from the inside out, the name of Angron is all that he has left. That and nothing more, for I suspect he no longer recognises the creature he sees reflected in the pools of spilled blood around the creaking shifting throne that we built for him.

We have only his pious, self-righteous brother Lorgar to thank for that.

And one day, we will.

Blood. Drink it down. The taste is…

Once Terra has burned and the Warmaster's claim to the Throne proven just, the XII Legion will festoon the new Imperium with the skulls of Lorgar's sons, the treacherous Word Bearers. We will kill them, maim them, and burn what remains. Perhaps then, our father can find some small measure of peace to carry him through eternity.

Am I like him? Do we walk the same path?

Maybe. I know that I am marked by… something.

Its eye is upon me, the same sleepless and unwavering eye that has watched my father all his life, no doubt. I can feel its malignant glare, burning unseen in the heavens with the intensity of a supernova, the eightfold heat washing through the base of my skull, prickling the flesh between my shoulders whenever I rest, the echoes of its half-remembered name ringing inside of my skull.

It watches everything. It sees all that I am, and everything I can never be.

Khârn. Khârn. Khârn. Betrayed.

Kill them. Maim them.

Would that I were judged for my atrocities. I could answer to those in a heartbeat, and spit upon any who would say that a legionary's rightful role is not that of an attack dog.

Rather, I know that I am to be condemned for whatever vestige of mercy and sane thought I can still muster, when the killing is done and the Butcher's Nails are sated. Such things as 'mercy' and 'sanity' are of no interest to whatever it is that lurks beyond.

And peace for my father's soul is not something that concerns it one bit.

Burn them. Burn them.
The darkness retreats. The brain-fire cools. What—
Blood.
Blood, and pain, and nothing more.

The XII Legion fleet closed around its foundering leader, for the most part. The *Conqueror's* principal battlegroup had prepared to break from the warp as soon as they detected the fluctuations in her engine patterns - with the exception of the *Metzgerei*, whose prow was shattered, they made a relatively ordered translation and fell into a standard picket around the Gloriana-class beast. Other groups, those of the *Red Hound*, the *Merciless* and the *Rohimnal* in particular, continued their voyage for an hour or more before realising that anything out of the ordinary had even transpired, and were forced to double back.

Several other ships powered on into the aether, heedlessly. Whether they intended to keep pace with the Word Bearers or had decided to carve out their own destinies elsewhere in Ultima Segmentum, it was impossible to tell.

'Hang the lot of them,' Lotara muttered under her breath, reaching an unmarked hallway junction. 'Let the disobedient curs lose themselves and call it freedom.' She paused to orient herself. The agreed dock was one of three in this low section, and it rarely saw any traffic other than inter-group supply runs. She punched the number she had scribbled on the back of her hand into the keypad beneath a dead manifest screen, then cleared her throat and composed herself as best she could.

Truth be told, it was Lorgar's flight that troubled her more. The *Trisagion* and the *Blessed Lady* had not even paused when the *Conqueror* dropped out of the warp. A single crimson-hulled destroyer, its name purposefully blanked on auspex data returns, emerged only minutes after the collision, circled the picket once with gun ports open, then jumped away again. No vessel of the World Eaters had been able to raise the XVII on any medium- or long-range vox in all the hours since, nor had their astropathic calls received any kind of reply.

It was clear enough that the Word Bearers had deliberately abandoned them.

The heavy pneumatics of the voidlock hatch squealed as it opened before

her, to reveal a handful of armsmen from the battle-barge *Scathlocke*, descending the ramp of their shuttlecraft. She was somewhat relieved to find they looked as disorganised and slovenly as her own crew, but received their half-hearted salutes with as stern a glare as she could manage.

Advancing somewhat cautiously, they moved aside to reveal their charges: a most peculiar specimen of a man, with a gaggle of courtly sycophants fawning about him.

'Shipmistress Sarrin,' he said, ambling forwards with his astrolabe staff. 'You bring none of the Legion to greet us, on board the flagship?'

He was tall and wiry, bedecked in an outrageously long brocaded coat, tailored to make him look taller still. A velvet cap was pulled low over his brow. He stood a moment and peered down his nose at Lotara, sipping from a silver flask while his attendants whispered deviously to one another.

She wondered how long it would be before the contents of that flask, too, would redden.

'That's Flag-Captain Sarrin, good sir,' she replied, clicking her tongue. 'There is another master of this ship. You may have heard of him.'

The man nodded in contrition. 'Forgive me, flag-captain. We mean no disrespect. We are Navis Scion Ramosz, of the House Tevu.'

'What, all four of you?'

Ramosz's lip curled. 'We… We would be most honoured to answer Lord Angron's summons, and offer our services aboard the mighty *Conqueror*. We are merely surprised that not even any of his centurions deign to present themselves at this momentous occasion. The fickle and unreliable House Andrasta have failed the Twelfth Legion, and the primarch, and the Warmaster's new Imperium, for the final time, and House Tevu will—'

Lotara stepped aside, inviting him onto the ship with little more than a sigh and a shrug.

'A word of advice, sir,' she said. 'I'd keep all those sorts of thoughts to yourself.'

Somewhat deflated, the Navigator reached the end of the ramp, but halted suddenly as his foot touched the deck beneath it. He shivered, his skin paling, and his attendants pawed at his coat sleeves in concern.

'Oh, this is a strange thing,' he murmured. 'A strange thing indeed.'

'Sir?'

Ramosz gripped his staff tightly. He took another step. 'The *Conqueror*

is… She is not as we remember her. There is… something else… here. We can feel it all around, even in her iron bones. It thirsts for blood, truly, and it yearns… to be… free. And it does not like us.'

He pulled a worn lace handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at the sides of his neck.

'No, it does not like us one bit.'

One of the armsmen had lit up a lho-stick in the empty corridor beyond the hatch. Lotara slapped it out of his mouth as she passed.

'Just wait until you meet Kharn,' she called over her shoulder. 'He's going to hate you too.'

Ramosz and his coterie struggled to keep up with her, though the swaggering guards fell into an easy step around them all, cradling their las-carbines with the safeties off. Occasionally, she would see a dejected crewmember or Legion serf steal a look at them from up ahead, before darting back into the shadows. The *Conqueror* continued to grumble and groan around them - back here, closer to the midship battery sections, it sounded disconcertingly like a vast, empty stomach.

Lotara held out a hand and Ramosz duly supplied her with his flask. She was disappointed not to taste the cool water she so longed for, but some manner of decadent, spiced wine.

For now, at least.

'I'd like to tell you that you will get used to that uneasy feeling you describe,' she sighed. 'But you won't. Take solace from the fact that you'll be somewhat shielded from it, in the Navigator chambers. I gather they are most comfortable.'

They passed a corpse sprawled out on the deck plates. The young man had been dead for some weeks, and his tattered uniform had been stripped of all rank and insignia pins. His sidearm was also missing, and so too were his boots.

Ramosz covered his mouth. His attendants were completely silent for the first time since they had arrived.

Lotara handed back the flask. 'Apologies. Our maintenance crews are…'

She couldn't summon the effort to finish the excuse.

Thankfully, it was not more than nine conveyor-less levels back up to the ordnance bay where the medicae triage station had been established. As

they rounded the corner of a doubleback intersection leading into it, the first two armsmen faltered in their stride, and a startled whimper came from one of the Navigator's retinue.

A legionary stood guard in the wide doorway. He held two notched axes, loose and ready, and his once white battleplate was stained with old blood and other, less savoury filth. He wore a tabard of mail, and a trio of woefully small skulls hung from his belt.

The warrior did not move to block Lotara, nor any of the mortals accompanying her. He merely glared down at them through cold, emerald-green eye-lenses, shifting his weight slowly from foot to foot, his breath audible through the vox-grille of his helm.

Casualty estimates from the collision varied, since there were no solid numbers for the flagship's current crew, and there were certainly too few to mount any sort of organised sweep of the most heavily damaged areas. The compartments that had suffered full decompression had been automatically sealed off, and Lotara was forced to concede that they would likely remain that way for some time. She had seen for herself the void-frosted bodies on the other side of the internal bulkhead viewports.

Even so, there were scores of bodies here too.

Many had been bagged. But when the bags ran out, they had been covered with stripped tunics, or cargo tarps, or whatever else came to hand. The deck drains ran dark red - now a fairly common spectacle at any place on the ship - and the few medicae adepts that remained looked more like apprentice butchers.

Kharn, thankfully, was being tended to. The Apothecary, Kargos, was squatting on his armoured chest, stapling his face back together.

It had taken a while to subdue him. His frenzy claimed two more of the bridge crew before any legionaries had arrived to help, and Kargos hit him with enough tranq to kill an ogryn. When Kharn regained consciousness almost two hours later, he was surprisingly coherent, and remembered nothing of any of it.

Lotara wasn't sure if it was still entirely necessary, but the captain's arms were being held down by that leering, pallid ghoul Skane and one of his Destroyer squad. The sergeant looked up at her and grinned; he probably intended it to be shark-like, but she could see more empty gums than teeth, and sharks were not known to drool.

'Flag-captain,' he wheezed, straining his augmetic vocal cords. 'We're trying to decide who it was that gave him these new scars - the helmsman on the *Metzgerei*, or your Navigator. Well, *former* Navigator. I don't recall anyone ever cutting his face before, not even in the fighting pits. It's worth noting. There might yet be a score to settle.'

Lotara didn't respond. She was used to seeing Kharn covered in blood, but it tended to appear brighter and more unsettling whenever it was mostly his own.

She turned. Ramosz and his gaggle of attendants were all staring hard at their own feet.

'Kharn,' she called out. 'He's here.'

The reply she got was nothing more than a questioning grunt. Lotara waved Ramosz forwards.

'Chief Navigator from the *Scathlocke*. He's House Tevu. No blood ties to Andrasta that we could find.'

Ramosz bowed deeply, even lowering his astrolabe. 'Lord, we are honoured to serve you and the primarch. Doubtless you have no reason to recall such a trifle, but we were a member of Mistress Nisha's retinue for a while some years back.'

Kharn growled. 'Don't say her name again. That weak-willed bitch.'

Pausing to give Ramosz a pointed, sidelong glance Lotara prepared to dig her heels in once again. 'He's the best chance we've got. No one else comes close, not for guiding a Gloriana.'

To her surprise there was no further protest, but Kharn shifted in agitation beneath the Apothecary's weight.

'Aren't you done? Get off me Bloodspitter. Get off me now.'

Kargos pushed himself to his feet wiping his tools on the back of one leather gauntlet, while the two Destroyers moved to haul the reluctant patient up.

'Arise, Kharn the Bloody!' Skane chuckled, clapping him on the pauldron. 'May you—'

Kharn felled the sergeant with a single, barehanded blow to the side of the head, sending him crashing into an empty shell hoist cart. No one said anything for a long moment.

'Where are we?' the captain demanded. His face was puffy and raw around the rough metal fastenings, his left eye half closed and bloodshot. 'You.

Navigator. Can you tell me that, at least?'

Ramosz still would not look up. 'We have been comparing the fleet's position against the cartae, lord. We believe this to be somewhere at the periphery of the Ruthan Marches. Beyond the range of local system scrying, certainly.'

'Ruthan. One of Dorn's conquests. Should we expect a Seventh Legion presence?'

'Unlikely,' Lotara replied. 'There have been few reports of them operating outside the Segmentum Solar in years, so I doubt we'll face them until we reach the Throneworld. Assuming that's still our plan.'

The ship juddered softly beneath their feet. Casting a cursory glance over the rows of bodies in the chamber, Kharn turned and made to leave, without ceremony. 'Have all of these incinerated. Don't bother with funerary rites. And get our new Navigator installed immediately. We must be ready.'

'Ready for what? Lord Aurelian was orchestrating our combined attacks from system to system, and now he is gone. We have no target.'

'I do not need Lorgar's permission to make war,' Kharn spat, stepping over Skane's unconscious form. 'We are on our own now, Lotara. We will serve our own primarch. No other.'

She nodded wearily, re-tying her lank hair behind her head. 'So, where are you going?'

'Time is running short. It has been more than a month since we spilled an enemy's blood. Should I tell Angron that his brother has left him here to die? Or should we simply ask him who he would have us kill next?'

The legionary guard stepped aside, but Kharn halted unsteadily at the open doorway. He placed his palms on the dark iron bulkhead, and slowly put one ear to the metal.

The other World Eaters looked on, uncertain as to what they were seeing.

'Something wrong?' Lotara called out.

'Maybe,' the captain murmured. 'For the first time in a long time, I cannot hear my father's roar.'

What manner of warp-born sorcery can turn plasteel and adamantium to rippling flesh? Often have I trodden these halls since we returned to Nuceria, and yet still it unsettles me: the transitional space in which the pulse of the ship's great reactor seems to become a true heartbeat.

Only now, it is the silence beyond the heartbeat that unsettles me more.

Once, this was the broad colonnade that led to Angron's triumphal hall. The anteroom with its great doors, the wide steps leading down, down. In the earliest days, after Desh'ea, a handful of us stood here and learned what his prolonged bouts of silence could herald.

Bloated and venous, these living walls have almost - but not entirely - obscured the ancient words that grace the arch high overhead.

IRA VINCIT, IN SANGUIS LAVANTO.

The XII Legion bathes in blood now, for true.

Two warriors stand beneath this legend. Their hulking Cataphractii suits have left bruises on the floor where they have paced back and forth. They are clad in red and brass and bronze, in imitation of the primarch's own Martian plate from the latter years of the Great Crusade.

We *are, all of us, an echo of Angron at some level or another. Splinters of his fractured psyche, perhaps?*

'Devourers,' I call out. 'Stand aside. I will pass.'

The first raises his bladed fists in defiance of my rank, traceries of power arcing between the razor-sharp claws. Over the points of his exaggerated, toothy gorget, his eyes are weary.

'Hold, captain. You are not welcome here.'

His name is Tarugar. An unremarkable centurion, he claimed his place among the primarch's supposed honour guard after I slew his predecessor Borok, and walked away. Tarugar did not even earn this paltry thing for himself.

He is no champion of the Legion.

I do not break my pace. I stride right up to them both, the second warrior levelling his chain-glaive and gunning the motors.

The click-whine of his Terminator armour's heavy actuators gives him away. In the instant before his all-too-obvious lunge, I slap the weapon's blade down with one hand and break the haft beneath my boot.

Tarugar slashes at me with his claws once, twice. Drop. Turn. Come up behind him. The other legionary tries to grapple, to hold me in place for the killing strike. His strength is immense. The breath is forced from my lungs. I snatch the combi-bolter at his hip, and press it to his bare forehead.

Single shot.

Brain matter, dark blood.

How many Devourers have I slain, now? How many more will I?

The dead warrior topples over backwards, taking me down with him. It is a few seconds before I can slip free of his spasming arms, tossing the gun aside.

Tarugar stands dumbfounded. He raises his claws another fraction, but takes half a backward step as I move inside his guard unopposed. I can feel the blades' field prickling the hairs on my forearm.

I lean in close. His adrenaline levels are spiking. My voice is a pitched, cold whisper.

'Does Angron even know your name, Tarugar? I doubt it. Stand aside.'

He grinds his teeth. He battles not against me, but against his Butcher's Nails. I can read my brothers as easily as I could once read our father, and Tarugar's sense of self-preservation soon outweighs his need to test himself any further against the primarch's favoured son.

'Damn you, Kharn,' he hisses. 'I hope he eats you alive.'

I glare at him wordlessly as I unbar the doors and haul them open. He turns away, cursing under his breath in guttural Nagrakali.

No champion of the Legion. No fit guardian for our primarch.

If we still have any primarch left to guard.

Yawning black before me, the steps descend into what has become Angron's dungeon cell. I take them slowly, one at a time, knocking aside the debris that litters them with the edge of my boot. The air is foul. I measure my breathing urging my hearts to slow.

Know no fear. Show no fear. Show no pity, and no doubt.

We *have played this game many times before, the primarch and I, and I have tried to learn from every beating I received.*

The last step delivers me onto the triumphal hall's floor.

'Father?'

I freeze. The word, half-formed upon my lips and yet spoken aloud by another voice, brings me up short.

I scan the darkness in the chamber's recesses. The spaces between the skull piles. The vaulted reaches of the high ceiling. The only light comes from the anteroom at my back. I slowly, cautiously, risk another step forwards, and scattered shards of bone crackle beneath my tread. I cannot see my primarch, though at least l now know for certain that he is still here.

Half a legionary - the lower half - lies twisted on the flagstones like a discarded plaything, capped with a protruding kink of broken vertebrae. There are large teethmarks in the buckled ceramite of his war-plate. I see no point in questioning who he was, or where the rest of him might be.

Another step. Another. I carefully turn my back to the nearest wall, and let my vision adjust.

There.

Angron's eyes smoulder with their own infernal light, though far less so than the last time I stood before him in this place. Then, his inhuman gaze had been fierce, and fearsome, so that not one of us could long hold it. The murderous glare of the gods' most lethal creation.

But now the daemon prince watches me with something like… wariness?

He is crouched in the shadow of his throne - and such a thing is no small marvel for a being of his warp-gifted size and majesty.

No. Not crouched.

Cowering.

I cannot process what I am seeing. The Nails' ticking is an aneurysmal pulse in my ears, as well as my mind.

'Father?' *he calls again. Gone is the bestial growl, the hoarse rumble of a throat no longer capable of screaming itself raw. I would say, rather, that he sounds more like himself again. His old self. His former self. The broken warrior he was, before… before his…*

I do not know the correct term. I do not care to know it. This is beyond me, beyond any of us. We no longer trouble ourselves to wonder.

His immense, clawed fingers slip from the side of the throne as he pulls further back into the gloom, edging away from me.

'Father… is it over?'

He has broken his chains again. I can see them trailing on the floor. No one has ever been able to imprison Angron. Not for long. And yet, he has not tried to leave.

I steady myself, offering a cautious half-bow. To avert my eyes would be to invite death. I am staring down an unleashed monster.

'Sire, it is Kharn, of the Eighth Company.'

'Khorne…'

'Khârn, sire.'

Silence. Then, **'Grave-grub Kharn. Yes. Yes, I remember you.'**

This is the most lucid he has been in many months. Do I dare to dream, dare to hope, dare to pray *that this could be the beginning of something more? Perhaps even the salvation that Lord Aurelian claimed to have sought for him?*

'Where is the other paperskin?'

'Sire?'

'The sighted one. I do not feel her nearby. The… The…'

He is straining for something he cannot recall.

'Chief Navigator Andrasta. I am sorry to tell you, sire, that she is dead.'

The daemon shifts, and dry bones fracture beneath his immense weight. **'Did you end her?'** *he asks. The question takes me somewhat by surprise.*

'I did not. She took her own life.' I imagine all the ways this conversation might play out, and decide that any further detail would be an unnecessary risk. 'We cannot be certain why. We have arranged for a replacement.'

The primarch reaches slowly for his blade, half-buried but not forgotten amidst the detritus of the hall. As his fist closes around the scaly hide grip, the runes etched into the black metal begin to throb with un-light, enough to set the Nails fizzing and buzzing behind my eyes. This weapon is not like Gorechild, *or* Brazentooth, *nor any other that Angron has carried before. It was forged for none but him, and it is always hungry.*

I have seen it cleave through the hulls of Imperial battle tanks.

But he does not raise the great sword now. Perhaps he merely needed to remember how it feels in his hand. The links of his chains graze the flagstones.

'How long do they live, when no one takes their skulls?'

I cannot recall the last time anyone exchanged this many words with him. I slowly, carefully lower myself to the floor, making sure to keep our eyes locked the entire time. I will answer any question, no matter how mundane, if it will hold him here in the moment for just a little while longer.

'Mortals are feeble things, sire. Without intervention, they will endure for less than a hundred years, and much of that is spent in pain. But Mistress Nisha Andrasta was somewhat older than that, and curiously frail-minded. It is possible that she would not allow herself to understand what your Legion is becoming.'

Angron grows very still for a creature capable of such unnatural and unpredictable rage.

'My Legion,' *he growls.*

I do not respond. I regret having seated myself so close to him.

'What is it becoming, Kharn?'

The words gaoler *and* plaything *leap unbidden to the forefront of my agitated mind, almost making me flinch. I have no reason to believe that the daemon prince can read my thoughts, but those two felt disloyal, and irreverent, nonetheless.*

I consider my response.

'We are following you, sire. We will follow you into eternity.'

'Why?'

'Because you are our father.'

The truth of this statement appears to confound him. He looks me up and down, then scrutinises his talons, his forearms, the tips of his folded wings, lingering just a moment longer than I would like upon the heavy iron manacles around his wrists. Then he shakes his head, rattling the dreadlock-cables that still frame those animal features. It is like watching a mindlocked servitor trying to comprehend the myriad hypocrisies of The Apocrypha Terra *- a mind that once held the capacity to understand, now torn between the memory of what it was and the promise of what it could yet be.*

'I am not your father, grave-grub. You are not like me. I should not be here.'

The words sting. They always have.

Slowly, Angron begins to rise out from behind the throne. He towers over me, the great sword dragging in his grip, his hunched shoulders pushing aside the empty lumen fixtures that hang overhead.

I keep my voice level and measured. 'We have only ever wanted to please you, sire. My brothers and I, we—'

'I should not be here,' *the daemon rumbles again. His attention is drifting to the doors at the top of the steps. His eyes are growing fiercer. I need to bring him back, to hold him in this now dwindling moment.*

There is an empty battered helm lying on the flagstones near my foot. It will serve.

'Do you remember the red sands, sire?' I ask quickly. 'Do you remember the honour of the caedere remissum*? Do you remember what it signifies?'*

Angron twitches. He peers at me once more, a blast of hot breath gusting

from his snout.

I continue.

'When we found you, we did not know what you wanted of us. Not really. Nothing we did could earn your approval. The rulers of Nuceria, the high-riders, quickly made their peace with Guilliman after your rebellion was ended, and gladly joined with the empire of Ultramar. Though you would not allow us to return there, we thought to mark the sacrifice that you and the Desh'ean gladiators had unknowingly made for us. For the Imperium.'

I pluck the helmet up from the floor. The eye-lenses are broken, the grille dented inwards.

The primarch's expression is unreadable. But he has not killed me yet. That is something.

I turn the helmet over in my hands.

'Here - the twin-crests of the remissum, like bladed horns. When a warrior in the arena knew their mind was failing, when they had spilled too much blood and could no longer find pleasure in anything else, then they would wear them as a warning to their foes. The bout would be sanguis extremis. *To the death. My brothers and I saw that it was a bold and noble thing to proclaim oneself beyond hope, sire. Beyond redemption.*

'And so, as the War Hounds became World Eaters, many of your veteran companies adorned their helms in this fashion. We wanted you to know that we mourned with *you, and that every battle we fought at your side would be to the death.'*

'**Not for you!**' *he growls.* '**The mantle is not for you!**'

'Then you remember enough to know that it did not end well, sire? We tried to learn of your past, and you killed us for it. We tried to celebrate the breaking of chains, and you killed us for it. We tried to teach you how the Imperium wages war, and instead you hammered the Butcher's Nails into our skulls so that we would eventually kill one another, and spare you the effort.'

Without warning, Angron lets out a roar of inhuman hatred and rage, a roar loud enough to rattle my armour plates, and sweeps the great blade around in a flashing arc. His throne of skulls, the throne we built at his command, is obliterated in a single heartsbeat.

Chipped teeth and fragments of bone rain down.

I keep my eyes closed for as long as I dare - and that can only be a second

or two. The daemon is breathing hard, less than a metre from my face. When he speaks, I can see the sharp, iron fangs glinting in his maw.

'If you wish to prove yourself to me, Kharn of the Legion, then you must follow this path to its end. We were all born to bleed, but the gods' favour is not given easily, or quickly. You must pay for it with blood and skulls. Blood enough to drown the stars, and skulls beyond number. The crusader will tell you as much.'

'You mean Lord Aurelian?'

Angron does not appear to recognise the name.

I exhale slowly. 'As we feared they would, sire, the Word Bearers have left us. Our fleet now stands alone, deep within Ultima Segmentum.'

'Then why do you keep me here? Why do you keep me in the dark?'

'This is your flagship, sire. Your place is with us. We spill blood together, so that you may remain.'

He shudders, screwing his eyes shut and letting out a vile sound that could almost be a whimper. **'No. No. The Legion is not mine, not any more. The Blood God calls to me. He is calling me to his side, to… to…'**

'Sire, l assure you, we are free to—'

'No!' *he shrieks.* **'Reality itself drags against these imperfect limbs! My strength is failing! I should be so much more, but you… you will not let…'**

The primarch begins to claw at his own face.

'This is not freedom! It is slavery!'

I fall to my knees. It wounds my soul to see him suffer like this, and to know that we keep him here for our own selfish reasons. It is far more than slaughter for slaughter's sake. For our sins, we have shackled Angron to the material realm, as Lorgar urged us.

We simply do not wish to lose our father again.

I *do not wish to lose him.*

But, if this loss of self is the price of immortality, then neither do I wish to follow in his footsteps. I do not wish to lose him, but I will not *lose myself.*

The daemon prince rises to his full height, opening those leathery wings so wide that they almost touch the pillars on each side of the hall. The deck beneath his cloven hooves begins to shudder as otherworldly energies roil about us. He roars again, bringing dust from the arches above.

'I will have blood! Blood! Blood for the Blood God! Blood for my lord

Khorne!'

The runes upon his blade pulse in time with his black heart, picking out the harshest angles of his hell-forged armour plate, and I wait for him to strike my head from my unworthy shoulders.

* * *

It was more than an hour before Kharn returned to the bridge. He was carrying his battle helm loosely in one hand, the bristles of the centurion crest splayed and unkempt.

Lotara brushed her fingers back and forth inside her uniform collar. The skin on her neck felt raw.

'I didn't know if you'd be coming back this time,' she muttered. 'That was a bad quake. We've lost power to life support along the upper portside flank. I've ordered a hard seal of the embarkation decks as a precaution.'

The legionary regarded her for a moment as he passed. 'You shaved your head.'

She shrugged, and stepped up to the command dais, sheathing her combat knife.

'I did. It's always too damned hot in here.'

The smile that twisted his features was cruel, but short-lived; Kharn winced as a thin trickle of blood ran from the staple beneath his eye. It looked almost like a red tear.

'Where is Vel-Kheredar?' he demanded, wiping it away.

'Overseeing the repairs.'

'Summon him, Lotara. I have need of his talents.'

The flag-captain sighed, and took her place on the throne. From where she sat, Kharn appeared silhouetted against the flickering oculus. His attention was fixed upon the stained deck plates.

'Admiring your handiwork?' she said, with a sharp click of her tongue. 'Feel free to take a brush to it yourself, if you like. I'm sure I don't have to tell you that blood is basically impossible to clean up without water.'

He didn't answer.

She rubbed imaginary grime from between the brass keys on her armrest pad. 'So… has Lord Angron issued us with any new orders? Do we have a specified target?'

Kharn shook his head.

'In that case, *my lord* - what are *your* orders?'

He trudged back to his customary position just to the left of the dais, and carefully set down his helmet.

'Have Master Tevu confer with his fellow Navigators across the fleet,' he replied, 'and plot a course for the nearest occupied system. If we wish our primarch to endure long enough to reach the Throneworld, then we must make sacrifice.'

The World Eaters fleet tore through the void, with the *Conqueror* at its head. The flagship trailed several of her damaged Ursus Claws, the great magnetic harpoons clattering against the scarred hull as she powered on in haste, heedless of any wider strategy than the immediate pursuit of bloodshed.

The bitterly cold world of Tekeli was the first that they encountered. Home to one of the great donjon-complexes raised by Rogal Dorn at the height of the Crusade, it had been intended as a bastion from which future generations might govern the considerable populace of the Ruthan Marches. In those more innocent times, notions of galactic Unity and the Imperial Truth had genuinely prevailed, and even the XII Legion had grudgingly agreed that a day might come when they could lay down their weapons for good.

Of course it was not to be.

There was no orbital bombardment no countenance of a void war. The World Eaters simply hurled themselves at the planet, desperate to feel solid ground beneath their feet and a weapon in each hand. The sky blackened beneath the sheer, overwhelming weight of the drop assault, from the high mountain passes to the frozen seas, and the defenders knew that they had already lost.

A maniple of engines from the Legio Thanataris - the only Titanicus element within the sector - had taken command of the local garrison. Deploying to the lowlands beyond the donjon with their Secutarii ground forces arrayed in earthworks upon the flanks, they would make the traitors pay dearly for every metre of ground.

But when the first waves of traitor drop pods came down within the civilian centres to the northwest, the princeps realised they had wholly

misjudged the World Eaters' intentions.

The Legion had not come to crush the bastion, but to slaughter every last man, woman and child on Tekeli.

It went on for days. While the vox-net lasted, the open channels became a cacophony of agonised screams, offers of surrender and pleas for mercy, before finally dissolving into little more than fitful static.

On the eighth day, when the last of the Titans fell, a grim shadow finally spread its wings over the tallest ramparts of the donjon, and crimson lightning split the clouds overhead.

Wreathed in the smoke of a hundred corpse pyres, the daemon Angron raised his black blade to the heavens, and bellowed in unholy triumph as his blood-crazed warriors broke through the gates.

Vel-Kheredar knows me well, it seems.

The archmagos reforged Gorechild. Now he has reforged me.

22.

I will wear the red, the brass, the bronze, fresh from the armoury and turned by my own hand, though I am no Devourer. I spit on Tarugar and all the rest. Our primarch is a newborn creature of the warp, a prince of blood. He needs no protection that legionaries can offer.

Rather, I am sanctified in the colours that are said to most please our new god.

But I will not lose myself.

23.

Many of my brothers have followed my example, even as they follow me now on the field of war. The brain-fire keeps our blood hot. With every swing of our blades, we anoint the icy ground before us.

24. 25.

We will walk the Eightfold Path.

We will wear the mantle of the caedere remissum, even though the primarch forbade it.

We will rebel, just as he rebelled.

We will kill not because we are ordered to, but because we live for it. Blood, and pain, and nothing more.

26.

This last addition is the purest form of worship I can imagine, glowing

bright and crimson in the corner of my visor display. It is a calming counterpoint to the Nails' fierce tick, tick, tick…

Vel-Kheredar knows me well indeed.

27.

A tally. A measure of my skill, and a tether for my soul.

The others may do as they wish, but I will not lose myself.

28.

I will not become like our primarch.

29.

30. 31.

This is no brotherly contest of old. These are my offerings to the Blood God. By the count of their skulls will I prove my worth, for they are all I have to offer in place of my own, before each new battle's ending.

Tekeli. Horgan Prime. Dabrosc, and all three of its moons. Stenyr. The orbital cities over Parliax. Another world, whose name I forget. Nebe VI. Nebe II. Deluge.

And on, and on, to the hallowed Throneworld itself.

32. 33. 34. 35.

My father's name is Angron. That is all that he has left.

We have only Lorgar to thank for that.

And one day, we will.

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THE ANCIENT AWAITS

Graham McNeill

OceanofPDF.com

Names had power.

Any novitiate of the Thousand Sons could tell you that.

To know something's name was to *understand* it, to have a window into the very heart of its being and see the workings of the machinery that underpinned it.

To pick the lock on a soul, you needed its name.

A name told you *everything*. The conventions of a name told you of the people who coined it. Etymological roots spoke to the historical circumstances of its origin, and each linguistic change that mutated it along the way told a unique story.

Names were *everything*.

Which was why Vistario's ignorance of this world's name so vexed him. The star chart Murshid had empathically drawn from the stagnant waters of the orrery retained no record of it, and the caustic winds blowing over the planet's irradiated plains only muttered the same imprecation that had drawn them to this barren rock in the first place.

'I can still hear it,' said Akhtar, a dusty gauntlet pressed to the faded Raptora icon at the side of his helmet.

'We all hear it,' snapped Murshid. Murshid was Athanaean; he heard the planet's lament most keenly.

He'd once likened walking the surface of dead worlds to stepping into a stream of liqnite and feeling the aching cold slowly seeping up through his flesh until his entire body was rigid. The gifts of the Great Ocean were manifold, but so too were their burdens.

Vistario's fellowship had been Corvidae, back when the idea of fellowship had meant something. He'd learned his craft under the tutelage of Magistus Amon in his clockwork pyramid of brass, honing his ability to unweave the myriad threads of potential futures. His instincts for the truth of what might be were strong, but in the centuries since the retreat from Terra, the Corvidae had waned, now a shadow of its former glory.

The Great Ocean - always a treacherous mistress - had become a raging virago of psychic fury, the last breath of the Warmaster still echoing, centuries after his fall.

Yet even the mightiest oceans know ebbs and flows, and sometimes the veil obscuring the future would part, allowing brief glimpses into the endless, branching possibilities of the future.

One such glance had lodged in Vistario's mind like a knapped shard of flint. A gleaming, reflective blade in which he saw this dead and nameless world, a hollow city and a plaintive message from a time already layered with mythic allegory, like a sunken wreck overtaken by the encrustation of deep-water denizens.

Vistario had dismissed the vision as meaningless, casting it from his mind to fly on the aether-winds of the Planet of the Sorcerers.

Just another fragment of unknown prophecy.

Useless.

Or so he had thought until the Crimson King appeared within his crystalline tower, ablaze with psychic might: a terrifying monster of ego and fury.

'Go,' Magnus commanded. 'Heed this message. Find the messenger.'

Heed this message.

Find the messenger.

Two simple orders, yet to obey the primarch's command was almost impossible. Following a fragmentary vision without context was like chasing a whisper of thought in an angry mob, a hundred echoes spreading from the source, each amplifying exponentially and mutating until all trace of the original was obscured.

The three of them had left the Planet of the Sorcerers aboard the *Clavis Aurea*, a vessel so transformed by that world's chaotic nature as to be unrecognisable even to its original shipwrights.

Guided by Murshid's psychic map, Akhtar steered them through the roiling vastness of the Great Ocean with a seer stone torn from the ruins of the Reflecting Caves.

High in the Navigator's compartment, Vistario journeyed in the third enumeration, clinging to the gossamer-thin memory of his discarded vision. He replayed it over and over in his mind in search of some hitherto unseen clue as to its source, some echo that might point him towards greater understanding.

Vistario had lost track of how long they had searched.

Years, most likely, but who could know in a realm where time was the first of the universal 'constants' to be brushed aside?

He had despaired of ever seeing the vision again. Their quest was as futile as reading a message in a bottle washed upon the shores, writing a reply and casting it back into the waters in hope the original sender would read it.

But Magnus the Red had issued his command, and to fail in any task, even an impossible task, was to invite terrible retribution.

Better to stay away than return empty-handed.

Then, with hope all but lost… a miracle. The mob parted, the whisper became a shout and its source was revealed. A simple phrase: ambiguous, yet portentous.

The Ancient awaits.

Little remained of the city's soaring majesty, though Vistario imagined it had once been beautiful.

Its destroyers had been thorough. The ground still bore the scars of an orbital bombardment so ferocious it had pounded an entire substrate of the surface to ash and vitrified rock. Walking at ground level was like traversing a plateau of volcanic glass, and its outline had only been possible to discern from the air.

Vistario mag-locked his bolter to his thigh and bent to lift a delicate shard of wafer-thin glass shaped like the head of a spear. He turned it over in his hands, the lens of his helmet staring back at him from its reflective depths.

In the space of a breath the image changed.

Vistario dropped the shard and it shattered, breaking into an unnatural arrangement of pieces. He saw significance in the pattern, but a sudden wind scattered the pieces before he could divine its meaning.

'What did you see?' asked Murshid, bringing his bolter to his shoulder as he read the sudden change in Vistario's aura.

'I do not know,' he replied. 'It was a fleeting glimpse only.'

'Of what?' said Akhtar, traversing his weapon over the ruins.

'A host of accusing eyes, as if reflected in a broken mirror.'

'A vision of the future or an echo of the past?' asked Murshid.

'You know better than to ask that,' said Vistario.

They pressed on, moving towards what he knew with a certainty he could not explain was the heart of the city. The rubble here was thicker, more deeply stacked - perhaps a king's palace or some other grand civic structure.

'Here,' said Murshid, pausing by a heap of fallen granite blocks of polished pink, each with the suggestion of swirling carvings upon its outward face. 'These were once part of a greater whole.'

'Weren't we all?' muttered Akhtar.

'Have a caution,' said Vistario. 'All whispers eventually return to the Planet of the Sorcerers. Did Ulthar's fate teach you nothing?'

That silenced them all, the fate of the Athanaean splinter cult all too keen in their recollections.

'Can you rebuild it?' asked Murshid, turning his attention back to the blocks.

'Easily,' said Akhtar, eager to employ his powers. He rose into the seventh enumeration to lift the blocks, turning them over with brute psychic force and twisting them upon their axes until they slotted together like a three-dimensional puzzle.

The remnant of an archway was formed, seven metres tall and three wide, with knotwork carvings etched upon each cyclopean stone.

Vistario approached the towering arch and paused to examine the carvings. 'They resemble musical notes.'

'That is *exactly* what they are,' said Murshid, his head tilted to the side as he followed their course with a finger in the air, like an orchestral conductor. 'Every block is a song within a greater work, a choral symphony rendered in stone and sung by those who trod its byways.'

A series of jumbled impressions passed through Vistario's mind at Murshid's words. Of singers and war, of fire from the heavens: the final cacophony, the closing curtain of a drama…

'No, not the closing curtain,' he whispered. 'The *opening* act…'

His eyes were drawn by some strange volition to the cracked terrazzo of a once tiled thoroughfare, now revealed by the building of the archway. The tiles glistened with spots of gold in the wan sunlight of the dead world, and Vistario knelt to lift something.

'What do you have there?' said Akhtar.

Vistario turned the object over like a stage performer flipping a coin between his fingers.

It had once been a tapered cylinder, but had been pressed flat by the weight of the blocks. He saw now that it was not gold, but brass, its surfaces striated with heat and a faded mark that told of its origin.

Vistario stood and held out what he had found.

'That's a bolter shell,' said Murshid, reaching out to touch it, but thinking better of it at the last second as he saw the armourer's mark upon it.

Akhtar had no such reservations, and plucked the shell from Vistario's palm. He turned the round over and Vistario read the confusion in his aura as he too recognised the mark.

'World Eaters,' he said, uncomprehending.

The wind surged at his words, and once again they all heard it, a discordant, screeching psychic call. Stronger now, closer. They felt its grief, heard its fury, and most of all, they sensed its infinite patience.

The Ancient awaits.

Following the psychic scream to its source was not difficult.

The surface of the planet seemed now to open up before them and previously obscured pathways ran arrow-straight through the blasted landscape like the great Romanii roads of old. Patterns that had been invisible before were now undeniable, and the city's original plan became clearer with every step they took towards its heart.

Akhtar led the way like an eager bloodhound closing on its prey.

Murshid walked alongside Vistario.

'Akhtar's mind is blunt, but surely you must feel that we are not alone on this world?' he said.

'I have felt… something,' agreed Vistario. 'Can you identify it?'

'A powerful mind,' said Murshid. 'More than that I cannot say. Every time I try to focus on its thoughts it slithers from my perceptions.'

'We are seeking something desired by the Crimson King,' said Vistario.

'We should have expected we would not be the only ones in search of it.'

'True, but anything that seeks to thwart the designs of Magnus the Red is not to be taken lightly.'

'Do what you can,' ordered Vistario.

'I will, but whatever else has come to this world is not what concerns me most. It is that I believe who or whatever is sending out this howling missive is aware of us.'

'Then it is not just me that feels we are being reeled in like a fish on a hook,' said Vistario.

'No,' agreed Murshid. 'It is not just you.'

The path led the three warriors of the Thousand Sons to a canyon-like gouge torn by something massive falling from the sky. It led to a blackened abyss, like the gate to some mythic underworld.

'Not the best omen,' said Murshid.

'Did we expect anything else?' replied Vistario. 'But a trap is not a trap if the prey is aware of the hunter.'

Once again, Akhtar led the way.

The darkness within was absolute, but easily penetrated by the senses of their baroque war-plate. The rock of this world was glossy and molten, rippled by unimaginable heat. It plunged downwards at a steep angle until it emerged into a deep, vaulted space of soaring arches, high, fluted pillars and shattered chambers.

'Catacombs?' wondered Akhtar.

Vistario's gaze followed the curve of a domed roof to where its structure had been ruptured. Dust drifted from above and thin spars of light speared into the darkness.

'No,' he said. 'Parts were once open to the sky. This entire area was built both above and below ground.'

'This was a city of secrets and lies,' said Murshid, taking a knee and placing his hand on the ground. 'One face presented, but it was a compliant mask. Its serpent face was hidden beneath.'

Whispers drifted on the wind, a thousand muttering voices just beyond the threshold of hearing. Vistario sensed their anger, watching with a wary eye as dust devils swirled in his peripheral vision. His footsteps stirred the abrasive sands, and Vistario heard a scratching sound, as if he walked upon the ashen ghosts of this world's people.

Who knows, perhaps I do, he thought.

An angled roadway curved away into the darkness, and Vistario set off along it, picking a path through fallen rocks and skewed girders twisted by ferocious heat and pressure.

'The fury of the bombardment was absolute,' said Akhtar. 'That this place has survived is nothing short of a miracle.'

'No miracle,' said Vistario, pointing to where the stonework of the underground city revealed reinforced steel embedded within. 'This region of the city was designed to withstand attack.'

'The world above was built by human hands,' said Murshid. 'A pre-Crusade culture, if I read the echoes of Old Night correctly. Why would they build their world to withstand the fury of a Legion?'

'*That* is a mystery indeed,' said Vistario. 'Perhaps the one who has drawn us here can answer.'

The roadway passed through a set of armoured blast doors, and from that point onwards, the rough and damaged stone of the city above took on the utilitarian character of an industrial facility. Its walls were layered plascrete and flakboard, its ceilings reinforced vaults of latticed steel.

The walls were black, as though a firestorm had flash-burned through, and Vistario saw negative impressions on the wall where warriors had burned to death. The outlines were blurred by time, but disturbingly familiar.

'You see them too?' said Murshid, his voice wavering.

Vistario read the pain the Athanaean warrior was feeling.

'I do,' he said, the muscles in his jaw taut.

Deeper into the planet they travelled, along metal-decked passageways, down twisting screw-stairs and descending dormant embarkation elevator shafts. The presence they had felt on the surface lingered in Vistario's mind, like a distant pressure. Whatever it was, it remained beyond all their perceptions.

'This was some form of military launch facility,' said Akhtar.

'No,' said Vistario. 'It is too small for squadrons of attack craft.'

'I know,' snapped Akhtar. 'More like a hidden, private facility such as a planetary governor might construct.'

'Perhaps we are following the lost words of a long dead Imperial commander,' said Vistario. 'Ironic that it would be warriors he would consider traitors who finally heed his call.'

'Traitor?' spat Akhtar. 'We betrayed no one. *We* were the ones betrayed.'

Vistario raised a hand, as much to forestall any careless outburst from the Raptora adept as to call a halt to their long march.

'We are here,' he said.

For all that the infrastructure around the launch facility had survived the bombardment, the hangar itself had not endured as well as its builders had expected. A small, orbit-capable starship sat at the far end of the hangar, its hull smashed open by falling debris and one swept-forward wing sheared from the fuselage by a fallen beam. A portion of the cave at the rear of the ship gleamed like glass, vitrified by the craft's jetwash.

'It was taking off when the roof collapsed,' said Vistario. 'Moments earlier and it might have escaped disaster.'

'Whoever he was, he was abandoning his world to its doom,' replied Akhtar. 'He deserved to die with his world.'

'We abandoned our world,' pointed out Murshid.

Anger flared in Akhtar's aura. 'No, we were wrenched from it at the moment of its greatest need,' he said. 'The Crimson King denied us the chance to fight the Wolves and make them pay for their cowardly attack.'

'We would have died,' said Vistario.

'Better that than this pitiful existence, brother,' said Akhtar. 'Sent scurrying through the shadows like errand boys for a master who broods only on his failures.'

Vistario rose into a more combative enumeration and fixed Akhtar with the steely gaze of one who has stared into the future.

'Choose your next words carefully, *brother*,' he said. 'The fellowships may be broken, but what has been sundered may yet be renewed. You and I both read the prophecy of Temelucha.'

Akhtar snorted derisively. 'The words of a madwoman.'

'Since when have prophets *not* been driven mad by the things they have seen?' pointed out Murshid, slapping a gauntleted palm on Vistario's shoulder guards. 'Our Corvidae brother hasn't been sane since the retreat from Terra. We have dwelled so long in the Great Ocean that maybe we are all a little mad.'

The tension between Akhtar and Vistario drained.

'Forgive me, brother,' said Akhtar. 'The fires of the great war may have

cooled, but mine still burn.'

Vistario nodded. 'The *great* war may be spent, but the long war goes on. We are yet part of it and I believe the Crimson King has a plan for how it can be won.'

'You really believe that?' said Akhtar.

'I have to,' replied Vistario. 'It is all I have left.'

Further discussion was ended by a clatter of stone from the front of the starship and a screech of twisting metal. All three of the Thousand Sons swung their bolters to their shoulders and rose into the war enumerations. Vistario stretched out his consciousness, searching for hostile minds.

And cried out as the force of an ancient mind skewered his brain with a lance of white hot power. He staggered as he felt patient hatred stab into him, its force so potent and singular that his secondary heart kicked in as the main organ ruptured.

'Vistario!' shouted Akhtar as his chest hiked with a sharp intake of breath.

Vistario raised a hand, switching from enumerations of war to ones of defence. Piece by piece he built his mental fortress, a citadel from which his mind could operate while protected from psychic attack. The cacophonous roar diminished, and he blinked the dazzling lights away from the insides of his eyes.

'I am fine,' he said, pushing himself to his feet.

'What was that?' said Murshid, getting up off his knees, a viscous fluid leaking from his gorget. As much as Vistario had staggered under the psychic force of the assault on their senses, Murshid would have felt it far worse.

Akhtar too, blunt as he was, had suffered. 'That was no psyker.'

'No,' agreed Vistario. 'Fourth enumeration. Advance.'

Dust and rubble fell from the roof of the cavern, dislodged by the force of the assault. An assault Vistario now realised had not just been psychic in nature, but sonic. Hideous aural trauma and dissonant harmonics combined to form a screeching howl that would have obliterated their hearing but for the cut-outs in their armour.

'Careful, Vistario,' said Murshid. 'There is great hate here.'

Vistario nodded as he rounded a promontory of fallen rock and steel, his bolter tracking to the source of the psycho-sonic assault.

The prow of the craft had been split open in its abortive take-off, a six

metre gash torn through to the pilot's compartment.

At first he could not understand what he was seeing.

A host of cables trailed from the starship like a writhing colony of snakes. They were coupled with an outlandish device, the function of which Vistario could not even begin to guess.

But that was not the most surprising discovery.

Lying on its side, partially crushed by a giant spar of steel fallen from above was the shattered outline of a Dreadnought. Dust and ash lay thick on its adamantium sarcophagus, the colour of its armour all but obscured. One leg had been sheared from its body, and its left side was buckled inwards so deeply that the flesh within was surely dead. Its weapon arms, a Kheres-pattern assault cannon and a splay-clawed power fist were aimed skywards, as if this ancient hero of the Legions had sought to vent his fury towards the heavens with the last of his existence.

The Dreadnought lay upon something half buried in the rock of the cavern floor, its surface heat-burned and unrecognisable. More cables snaked from the wrecked starship and were hooked into the object's underside as well as to the war machine

'A Dreadnought?' said Akhtar, lowering his weapon.

'Keep it covered,' snapped Vistario, edging forwards to better examine the strange device. It appeared to be a monstrous hybrid of musical instrument and an apparatus of excruciation designed by a sadistic lunatic. Its colours were faded now, but once it had been vividly painted and elaborately ornamented. It thrummed with energy, ripe with potential, and Vistario looked for a way to disconnect it.

An angry buzzing built as he reached to unhook the nearest cable, as if the machinery were alive and aware of his intent.

'Do. Not.'

Vistario flinched at the sound, a grating, wheezing vox-exhalation. He spun and brought his bolter up to aim at the not-so-dead-after-all Dreadnought. His finger tightened on the trigger, then eased off as he found himself staring down the multiple barrels of the Kheres assault cannon.

'You. Are. Not Him,' said the Dreadnought.

Vistario slowly lowered his weapon, lifting his free hand away.

Murshid was held in the Dreadnought's fist, struggling in vain against strength that could tear open the hull of a Land Raider. Akhtar stood apart,

his bolter trained unerringly on the Dreadnought's sarcophagus.

A gesture of defiance only. Even if the mass-reactive penetrated a weak spot in the Dreadnought's body, Vistario and Murshid would be dead before Akhtar fired the first round.

'So. Long. I. Have…waited,' said the Dreadnought. 'Forgot. Name. Forgot brothers. Only hate endured. Only vengeance sustained me.'

The towering bio-machine's voice was redolent with power, its words halting at first, then growing in coherence, as if the very act of addressing the warriors before it was rekindling a memory of speech.

Soft light built within the cracked augmetic orb that was all that remained of the war machine's sensorium. Could it see him, and what would it make of his war-plate's colour…?

'What Legion are you?'

'Fifteenth,' said Vistario.

'The sons of Magnus the Red. The Cyclops. The Crimson King. Sorcerer Supreme, Master of Prospero. How fare the Fifteenth after so long? Tell me you did not fall into the same trap as my brothers. Tell me you endure and yet stand at our father's side.'

He doesn't know, thought Vistario. *All these years trapped below, and he doesn't know. How could he?*

'The Thousand Sons endure,' he said.

'I may be smashed and clinging to life, but I know evasion when I hear it.'

Vistario shrugged. 'You would not like the truth.'

'My like or dislike for the truth is immaterial,' said the Dreadnought. 'Truth is all we have. It is our shield against falsehoods. When facts can be twisted to become weapons, nothing good can endure. The Emperor taught me that, but too few of us took the lesson to heart or understood how vital it was.'

Vistario briefly considered pointing out the lie that lay at the heart of the Emperor's crusade, its corrosive effect like a poison pill slowly dissolving under the tongue. But he needed no Corvidae foresight to know the Dreadnought would kill him instantly for such an utterance.

'What is your name?' asked the Dreadnought.

'Malin Vistario, of the Corvidae Fellowship. What is yours?'

'I am… *he who remembers,'* said the Dreadnought. 'Or I used to be. An ancient mystic once said that it is the doom of men that they forget but my memory is as broken now as my body. My purpose… I had one. It was to

know. To remember. Examples of the past shape the present. Events of the future compel the past.'

Vistario was acutely aware of how precarious was his position. The Dreadnought was clearly insane, after the long centuries spent in isolation without Techmarines to minister the complex bio-mechanical cycles of his existence and maintain his fugue state of slumber.

'What were you to know?' he asked.

'To know what, you ask?' growled the Dreadnought in irritation. Shells clattered as rusted auto-loaders slammed them into the assault cannon. 'Does not the Fifteenth retain one whose task it is to *know*? *To see* everything! I once knew all the things that mattered - names, dates, places. Things of moment. The oaths taken. The oaths broken. The litanies of the faithless. I am he who remembers. I am the *Ancient of Rites.'*

A sudden flash of prescience swept through Vistario, and he craned his neck to look around the chamber, his mind's eye racing back the way they had come to the surface. He saw the war-wracked world above as the bombs fell from orbit, shattering the city and laying waste to those who defended it.

'I know this world's name,' he said, as its terrible legacy poured into him.

'Yes,' said the Dreadnought. 'Of course you do. Horus cut it into the heart of every legionary, whether they were there or not.'

'This is Isstvan III.'

'Yes.'

'And you…' said Vistario. 'You are—'

'I am Ancient Rylanor,' said the Dreadnought.

Ancient Rylanor.

Vistario knew the name. How could he not?

The tales spun around the betrayal at Isstvan III filled entire wings of the Gallery of Pergamum. This was where the canker at the heart of the Legions was first revealed, where the Legions had first spilled the blood of their brothers in open warfare. Magnus had despatched cabal after cabal seeking truths from those who had fought in that battle, desiring to unravel its root causes. It seemed to Vistario to be a thankless task, for every adept of the Corvidae knew that nothing ever *really* began. There could be no single moment from which this or any other event sprang; the threads could

always be followed to some earlier moment and the actions that preceded them.

To attempt to pin any event's origin to a single moment in time would drive a mind to insanity.

Perhaps it already has, thought Vistario, thinking of the desperate need he pretended not to see in his primarch's gaze.

Those who had fought through the virus-scoured hell-scapes of Isstvan III described loyalist warriors of the World Eaters, Death Guard, Sons of Horus and Emperor's Children fighting for months against their brothers, enduring unimaginable horrors in the face of inevitable extinction.

The only mention of the Dreadnought's fate came from that most unreliable of narrators, Lucius the Swordsman, who claimed Saul Tarvitz spoke of an underground hangar the Dreadnought was rumoured to have found.

'Why did you not escape?' asked Vistario.

'I would have, but the seismic shockwaves of Isstvan's death went deeper and lasted longer than any could have foreseen. The roof of the cavern collapsed, trapping me here as you see.'

Vistario glanced at the strange device hooked to the interior of the wrecked starship.

'And what is that?'

'A sonic weapon of some kind. A handful of my former brothers found this place and sought to kill me. They failed, but the power of their weapons crippled me and left me as you see me now.'

'And you wrought it into, what? A distress beacon of some kind?'

The Dreadnought's vox-caster grated with what Vistario took to be a rueful chuckle.

'A distress beacon?' said Rylanor. 'No, a lure.'

'A lure for what?'

The sound of dead skin slipping over rock sent a chill down Vistario's spine.

A silken voice answered the Dreadnought's question.

'For* me,'** it said. ***'Isn't that right, Rylanor?'

Vistario's mouth fell open as a towering, serpentine shape emerged from the shadows of the cavern. Multi-limbed, sinuous and beautiful, ivory white hair spilled across the shocking purple of his sculpted war-plate.

'At last,' said Rylanor. 'Fulgrim.'

The primarch was an abomination, even by the standards of warriors who had seen their own father hideously changed by the transformative energies of the Great Ocean. Vistario felt aether-fire pulsing within Fulgrim's body, his ability to manipulate its energies massively powerful yet unsubtle.

Swords glittered at his midsection, and his eyes roved the chamber, taking the measure of the presented tableau. How long had he been watching and listening? In the centuries since the Battle of Terra, the Phoenician's behaviour defied rational understanding or a sense of predictability. Magnus himself had given up any form of prognostication concerning his brother's actions, so how could Vistario even begin to predict what Fulgrim might do next?

'Ancient,' said Fulgrim, sliding over the floor with grotesque, peristaltic motions. ***'You look terrible. A disgrace, even.'***

'What has become of you, my primarch…?' said Rylanor, his horrified disgust clear even through the degraded quality of his vox-caster. 'You are a monster.'

'Says the scrap of ruined flesh maintained by grotesque machinery,' said Fulgrim, circling the four of them. His pale eyes were pearlescent orbs without pupils, soulless and devoid of anything that had once made him great. They regarded the warriors before him with only passing interest.

'Why does Magnus send his broken sons to Isstvan III? Did you leant nothing from the Wolves' destruction of Prospero? My hermit brother should know by now that his meddlesome curiosity only leads to disaster.'

Vistario fought to find his voice, always a problem in the face of a primarch. Doubly so in the presence of one so altered. Yet even though Fulgrim's appearance had changed so terribly, pangs of longing stirred in Vistario's breast.

'We heard his message,' he managed.

'Too bad for you,' said Fulgrim with a grin, taking in their predicament. Murshid still hung like a limp fish in Rylanor's grip, Vistario was covered by the assault cannon, and Akhtar stood immobile, his weapon trained unerringly upon the Dreadnought's sarcophagus.

The Phoenician approached Rylanor.

'So, old friend,' said Fulgrim. **'You *have my attention. What is it you***

want me to hear? And do try to make it diverting - after all, you've had millennia to perfect it.'

Rylanor dropped Murshid and used the wheezing, grating limb to push its carapace upright. Vistario saw the muzzle of the assault cannon track away from him, following the primarch's movements.

He eased his mind into the warlike enumerations, letting the power of the Great Ocean into his flesh.

+Be ready,+ he sent to his brothers. A flash of thought only.

He felt their understanding, and flexed his psyche in readiness for wielding his powers. Conflicting visions pressed upon the meniscus of his mind: shredding bullets and mass-reactives, fire and an unstoppable tide of virulent destruction.

The omens are not good.

Dust and rubble fell from Rylanor's armour like sand in an hourglass. Fresh portions of the smashed object beneath the Dreadnought's body were revealed, and humming power cables ran from Rylanor's sarcophagus to an opened control panel.

Vistario felt his blood chill as he finally understood what it was.

'Has it truly been millennia?' asked Rylanor, his voice stronger now, coming from a time long ago and filled with infinite sadness and patient regret.

'It has,' said Fulgrim, moving closer. ***'Think of all that time wasted. All the glory unearned, all the victories denied.'***

Rylanor gave another grating bark of laughter.

'Glory? You think I sought glory? How little you understood of your own Legion. Yes, I have indeed perfected what I wish you to hear,' said Rylanor as Fulgrim reached out to touch him. 'And though I am sure you will find it diverting, it will not be me that says it.'

Fulgrim's grin faltered as he too saw what the Dreadnought's body had obscured.

'No,' he said, as if he thought he could stop what was about to happen with a word.

'Yes,' said Rylanor, sending an activating pulse of energy to the armed warhead of an unexploded virus bomb.

Vistario saw the moment of detonation a fraction of a second before it

happened. Instantaneously, he beheld a vision of the explosive spread of the Life Eater virus as it consumed them, dissolving like frost before the sun. He saw their doomed bodies transformed into replicating flesh refineries in which the hyper-evolving viral strands mutated and found ever more inventive ways of destroying organic material.

All of this he witnessed in the space between life and death, the most fleeting glimpse into an inevitable future.

But a fleeting glimpse was all an adept of the Corvidae needed.

+Akhtar!+

Already in the blunt, pugnacious enumerations, Akhtar was unleashing his power even as the detonation circuits of the virus bomb triggered. The casing shattered as the explosive heart of the bomb cracked open and the isolated viral compounds mixed in the precise amounts to catalyse the unstoppable reaction. Fire bloomed from the warhead in tortuous slow motion, lapping around Rylanor's sarcophagus like low-grade viscous promethium.

+I cannot hold it for long!+ cried Akhtar, his Raptora powers stretched to their limits in holding back the explosion. Vistario reached out with his mind and poured his power into the warrior, feeling Murshid do the same.

Fulgrim laughed as the creeping death slid slowly over the Dreadnought's body.

'Is this it?' he said. ***'You sought to draw me here to kill me?'***

Rylanor triggered his assault cannon, but - fast as quicksilver - Fulgrim caught it and crushed it before it could fire.

'No, I don't think so,' said the primarch, effortlessly ripping the arm from the Dreadnought's body. Sparks flew from the ruptured limb and Fulgrim gave the weapon a dismissive glance before tossing it aside.

'You betrayed us,' bellowed Rylanor. 'Your sons! You led us here to die. There is no forgiveness for that. None! You must die by my hand! The Emperor's justice will fall upon you. Not even Fulgrim the Illuminator can escape the Life Eater.'

Fulgrim leaned in close to Rylanor and shook his head.

'You wish me dead?' he said, scathing pity dripping from every syllable. **'Why?** ***Because you think I betrayed you? The Legion? Oh, Rylanor, your thoughts are so narrow. If you could only see us now, how beautiful we have become. We shine so brightly, each of us a brilliant sun.'***

Fulgrim reached down, sliding his bare hand inside a rent torn in the Dreadnought's armour. He smiled, closing his eyes and letting his tongue slip across his lips as he pushed deeper inside.

'Ah, there you are!' said Fulgrim, as Rylanor's vox-caster grated in fury. ***'Wet and wriggling. I can feel your panic. It's delicious!'***

Rylanor's power fist swung around, bathed in fire. It struck Fulgrim on the shoulder, but Akhtar's psychic force was not simply confined to the Life Eater's detonation. Fulgrim laughed off the sluggish attack and one of his lower arms drew a glittering sword of alien origin. The blade sliced in a cruelly precise arc, cutting through the fibre-bundle motivators and servos.

Rylanor's arm fell limp at his side.

Vistario watched the viral fire spread over the Dreadnought's carapace, slipping inside his buckled plates of armour. Rylanor did not care whether he lived or died, only that Fulgrim went with him.

'Do. Not. Do. This!' barked the Dreadnought.

'Why not? I am your master - I can do whatever I like. I can crush you or I can raise you up. Return to the Legion. Accept the gifts of the Dark Prince and you will walk at my side, clad once again in flesh. You can be anything, old friend! I will sculpt you into something beautiful - a god to these mortals!'

'Never! All we have left between us is that we will die together!' roared the Dreadnought, the upper portion of his carapace burning with blue flames. 'I am Rylanor of the Emperor's Children. Ancient of Rites, Venerable of the Palatine Host, and proud servant of the Emperor of Mankind, Beloved by all. I reject you now and always!'

Fulgrim laughed and said, ***'I'm sorry, did it sound like I was offering you a choice?'***

The primarch wrenched his hand from Rylanor's sarcophagus, dragging a sopping mass of fluid and matter with him. Glutinous ropes dripped from his fingers; he was like a midwife holding a mewling newborn. Ruptured cables spilled amniotic fluid so stagnant it must surely have been poisoning Rylanor with every passing second.

'I will remake you, brother,' said Fulgrim. **'You will be my crowning achievement.'**

Though his body was little more than rags of wet meat, Vistario sensed Rylanor's horror at this last violation. An inescapable destiny where he

would become that which he hated most.

+What do we do?+

The question was Murshid's, and the connection between the Thousand Sons was so strong that the Athanaean's perception for emotion spread to all three of them.

Vistario felt Fulgrim's infinite malice, his cruel enjoyment of Rylanor's anguish and the helplessness of the Thousand Sons. The primarch of the Emperor's Children revelled in his overweening pride, a trait Magnus had more than once told Vistario had been present long before his fall.

But more than anything, stronger even than Fulgrim's spite, Vistario felt Rylanor's pride and honour, the unbending core of greatness that had set him against his brothers and seen him descend into obsessive madness beneath the surface of a dead world.

Vistario took the measure of Fulgrim, seeing nothing worthy in him.

His warriors felt the moment his decision was made.

+Primarch Fulgrim!+ sent Vistario. +Rylanor deserves better than you.+

The primarch looked up, his once bright eyes now black and filled with the darkest poison.

+He deserves better than all of us.+

He raised his bolter and fired a mass-reactive into the back of Akhtar's skull. The Raptora's head exploded and with his death, the psychic force holding back the warhead's detonation ended.

Vistario saw fire.

And once more, all life burned.

It took much less time for the Life Eater to burn out on Isstvan III's second death. Its first ending had claimed eight billion lives, snuffed out in a matter of hours when Horus launched his bombardment from the *Vengeful Spirit*. With such plentiful mortal flesh to fuel the bio-killer's fury, the psychic scream was said to have eclipsed the Astronomican itself.

A shadow emerged from the undercity, a serpentine outline of cinders, held together by a web of neverborn energy. Not even the viral toxins wrought by ancient science could unmake that which the darkest powers of the warp had raised up.

The Phoenician's form was already weaving itself anew, but his soul was broken. For no pain, no hurt and no injury could wound such a being as

much as denial of its magnificence.

That was Ancient Rylanor's final victory.

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MISBEGOTTEN

Dan Abnett

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'Every man casts a shadow, not his body only, but his imperfectly mingled spirit.'

- Emerson, M2

Years later, long after the Triumph of Ullanor, and the great bloodshed of the Heresy, and the darkness of the Fall that ended it, men forgot the hope they had once shared.

It had been a fine thing, a spirit that had invested and fortified every soul, human and post-human alike as they stepped out from Terra upon the undertaking of reunion. They were torch-bearers, every one of them, carrying hope like a pure flame to illuminate the worlds and stars that had become lost from view in the long shadows of Old Night.

History knows this time as the Great Crusade, but the name was not favoured by the men who led it. The Emperor, who is now a watchful god, spoke to his sons on many occasions, affirming his desire that a better name be found. The word 'crusade' implied vengeance and cleansing, a scouring of worlds and a ruthless doom to all enemies. 'There may be no enemies at all,' Horus Lupercal had said. 'Distance and strife have walled the galaxy from us, and the old high routes and shiftways have fallen to disuse and are choked with unstirred dust. We have not passed that way in centuries. We have not been able. True, we bear our arms and strap our harness-plate upon us, ready to deal soundly with enemies arising. But we should not expect them, nor treat all we meet with that potential.'

Wars happened, and deeds of violent compliance driven by necessity. Those are the actions history remembers from that age. But for every world

or culture that resisted, or denied the offer of friendship, for every xenos race that baulked and drew arms at the approach of mankind, a hundred worlds rejoiced and hymned their relief to see the expeditionary fleets take high anchor in their skies. The Great Crusade, so called by those who came later, was for the most part bloodless. Though the expeditionary fleets raced out from Terra like the fragments of a nail bomb, they voyaged not to destroy but to locate the lost and scattered branches of the human species, to rebuild and re-light a galactic culture that Strife and Old Night had, together, put asunder.

Men forget that now. They forget the hope that had carried them forward. The wound of the Heresy War acts as monstrous punctuation in the texts of history, making it impossible to recall or even believe the spirit of optimism that had prevailed in the years prior.

Two days before his death, Horus Lupercal is said to have cried out that all hope was gone.

He was not foreseeing the murder that would end the civil war. Those close to him, though there were only a few left by then, believed he was lamenting the age before Ullanor, before Davin, before Isstvan and Calth. The time of uplifted spirit, and a resolve that seemed unbreakable. A glorious and inspiring template for the future that came from dreams of noble majesty, not visions of heresy.

A future that had seemed possible, until it was suddenly not. A future worth dying for, and, certainly, worth living for.

Ullanor had been marked. The greenskin xenos, 'orks' in expedition parlance, had risen to be one of the foremost real enemies of the Reunion Project. There was no dealing with them. Their bestial nature brooked no compliance and no negotiation. Plans had been drawn, threats assessed, and Ullanor had been identified as the site where the xenos menace would be met and put down.

The expedition fleets were rearming for deployment. Time was precious. Fleet strategists proposed a window of eight months relative before Ullanor ceased to be a viable fight zone and the xenos campaign would be obliged to shift strategies to a new target world.

Lupercal's fleet, the 63rd, lingered in the heliopause of the Issinium System, awaiting the return of compliance missions to Kest's Sun and

Velich Tarn. Though eager to make shift, Horus Lupercal would not leave fleet elements behind.

The 63rd had remained on station at the Issinium fringe for twenty months, and in that time had recorded six compliances, all peaceful. First Captain Abaddon had led missions to Kiskayde and Phocis, and obtained glad fealty from the cultures on both worlds. The Ordinators of Kiskayde, indeed, had furnished the expedition with auxiliaries to demonstrate their willingness to support the Imperial cause. Kiskaydin jump-troops in engraved chrome armour lodged in the troop decks of the flagship, drilling in preparation for the xenos compliance, and learning, wide-eyed, the histories of Terra that they had missed out on. Kiskayde was a human colony culture established during the Age of Technology's stellar exodus; though their accents and habits were strange, they had not forgotten their rites of birth and blood.

Captains Targost and Sedirae had brokered peace with the Fiefworlds at Orlustre. Captain Goshen had negotiated settlement with the wary and mistrustful Motherland of New Hearth, gently easing their concerns with gifts of high science and assurances of staged integration. Horus Lupercal had commended Lev Goshen for his adroit and sensitive diplomacy.

Lupercal himself had led an embassy to Issinium, and won the free compliance of High Concerns who governed the system. He had feasted with them for nine days, and shown no loss of enthusiasm as the performance of their oral history, which lasted for the entire feast, rolled on and ever on, sing-song.

Signals had come from Kest's Sun. Captains Loken and Qruze reported that the culture there was long dead. The signals that had drawn the fleet's attention had been found to be the automatic broadcasts of old telecommunication systems. Some viral plague, long defunct, had taken the ancient colonies during Old Night, and their beacons had been calling for help, pointlessly, for seven centuries. Loken and Qruze had spent a month searching the empty tomb cities for signs of life, or of stasis-held survivors. Now they were en route back to the fleet.

Seven cultures: six new friends and allies returning to the fold, and one lost. A fine result to show for twenty months' work, with no loss of life, though the Mournival quietly complained for lack of martial practice.

'Tell them it will come,' Horus told Maloghurst, his equerry. 'Ullanor awaits, and Ullanor will give them the test they seem to long for. But tell

them too… they should not wish for it. That we can bring our kin together, and no blood spilled, is the way my father would prefer. We are sensible beings, so we have prepared ourselves for war better than any species in the sea of stars. But though we are well made for battle, we always must desire it least of all possible outcomes.'

Velich Tarn was, then, that least of all desired outcomes. Assessed first as an outpost, or a small, starveling survivor stronghold, it had proven non-compliant. Captain Sejanus, favoured of all Lupercal's commanders, had led the embassy there and met ferocious resistance from the outset. His reports back to the waiting fleet had been brief and matter-of-fact. The environment was poor, and the human enclave there well fortified and armed with what he categorised as 'bio-mechanoid' weapons. They had first ignored and then rejected Sejanus' requests for contact. All hope of compliance had foundered when the Velich Tarn enclave commenced open hostilities. Their population was small - scans revealed only four hundred people - but their mindset was smaller. Velich Tarn would not submit to Imperial authority or even Imperial contact. 'They are extreme xenophobes,' Sejanus had written in a communique, clearly with a heavy heart, 'and refuse to deal with us. Despite their small numbers, they are formidably weaponised. They are determined to resist, and if left alone, I fear they will grow into a significant threat to stability in this zone. With regret, my lord, I request your permission to illuminate them.'

Horus read this missive quietly. Maloghurst and the others present could see from his humour that he was disappointed, and that he empathised deeply with his friend Hastur Sejanus' reluctance. Too many pockets of human survival had reacted to expedition forces with hate and fear during the course of the Great Reunion, most often the smallest and most isolated. Illumination was a last resort.

Horus granted the request, and sent tidings of consolation and forbearance to Sejanus.

A week later, Sejanus requested that the rest of his Fourth Company strength join him.

His reports were now referring to the opposition as 'the biomechs' or the 'biomech obscenities', and rating resistance as 'severe'. He had identified their leader as a man named Fo, and suggested '…there is no dealing here,

nor option for truce. Illumination must proceed to its most miserable extent, and this blight be erased.'

'I'm going to Sejanus,' Horus told Maloghurst.

'My lord,' Maloghurst chided softly. 'Hastur has it in hand, and is reinforced. Qruze and Loken are due back from Kest's sun in two days. We are ready to make shift to Ullanor.'

'My brave wolf Hastur struggles with this,' said Horus. 'It is a bloody business, the worst dealings we must contend with in this project. Worse than xenos-breed, for this is our own kind turned feral. I will support him. Oh, don't look at me like that, equerry. This is the last business we must undertake in this zone, and the only one that has proved bloody. I'll see it done away cleanly at Hastur's side. I'll not leave a mess here in this quadrant, nor leave one of my sons to bear the bitter burden alone.'

'If this is your wish, lord,' Maloghurst replied, for he knew when even his artfully twisted persuasion would not work.

'It is,' said Lupercal. 'Besides, I have been reading.'

'Reading, my lord?'

'Idly. From the old annals. I think I know who this Fo is.'

Even from orbit-descent, Velich Tarn did not look like a place any man would wish to stay for more than a day, let alone the millennia Fo's people were believed to have sheltered there.

Bone spires of rock rose like lines of fangs from miasmal lowlands and plutonic lakes that were toxic beyond any reason of local enviro-chemistry. Striated clouds raced across the skies, low and dense, thick with pollutants, driven by crosswinds of blast-zone force.

Illumination had gripped a corner of the landscape, the region of the main enclave. Uplands had been fractured by orbital weapons, and kilometres of rubble still glowed as the heat leaked out of it. The broken curtain hills lay under a vast pall of grey smoke that rose like the breath of a supervolcano hours from obliterating itself.

In the scorching twilight beneath the plume, the valley was alight with thousands of snapping, winking, flashing darts of weaponsfire as the entire Fourth Company of the Luna Wolves, along with mechanised support, maintained the grind to break Fo's enclave open.

Hastur Sejanus, his plate scored and dented, hurried up the dirt track to the

landing zone. A Stormbird, its white hull grimed with atmospheric soot was just settling on the wide mesh pads beyond the lines of empty troop carriers and landing barges. Daggers of blue flame stabbed from its vector jets as it touched down. Sejanus felt the thump of its mass transmitted through the temporary mesh decking.

Sejanus was alone. There hadn't been time to pull men out of the fighting line to form an honour guard. Lupercal, with characteristically puckish glee, had chosen not to give the Fourth Company captain advance notice of his arrival.

Sejanus strode out across the pad, steam roiling around his feet, the landing masts winking in the yellow light. The Stormbird's landing jaws were opening. Horus was already on the ramp.

'My lord,' Sejanus began.

Horus, in full war-plate, stepped out and embraced his captain.

'Don't, Hastur,' he said.

'My lord?'

'I know you, old friend. First, an apology for the lack of due ceremony. Then, some demand for censure for taking so very long to crush this nest of vermin.'

'I admit, I had both prepared.'

'Forget them,' said Horus. 'Let's talk inside.'

They crossed to the nearest modular. Inside, air-scrubbers purged the atmosphere lock, and recycle pumps hosed them in decontam spray. They entered the main command module, uncoupling their war-helms.

'Let me have the room,' Sejanus commanded.

The officers present saluted and withdrew. They were alone in the low-ceilinged strategy station, unmanned cogitators streaming battlefield data onto their raised glass plates.

'You came to…?' Sejanus asked, letting the question trail.

'Offer support,' said Horus. He set down his helm, glanced around, and then smiled at the captain. 'Your reports are candid, but brief, Hastur. I can tell, more by what you don't say than what you do, that this place plagues you.'

Sejanus shrugged. His face was drawn. Horus had never seen Sejanus so freighted with stress.

'I have tried to be succinct,' he replied. 'This place is a bane. This enemy… inhuman. In the light of the glorious compliances lately achieved, I felt I should spare the bald horror of it. When this is done, it is a thing better forgotten.'

'The truth is what the truth is, Hastur. I'm not a sensitive soul that needs to be coddled. And even in our worst moments, we may learn things that we may benefit from in later evaluation. You've maintained a full battle record?'

'Of course. We could have reviewed it together at some later date. Lord, this war is all but won. My spearhead squads are just hours away from taking the enclave heart.'

'How many have you lost, Hastur?'

Sejanus paused.

'Sixteen men dead,' he said. 'Another thirty wounded to such extent that augmetic repair will be required. Usually limb loss. I am ashamed of these loss statistics.'

'Because you are a full company of the Imperium's finest Legion, and you face just four hundred souls?'

'*Yes*, lord.'

'Fo's people must be something indeed. That's an unprecedented proportional hit-rate.'

'It is,' said Sejanus, 'which is why I have kept it to myself for now. But Fo's people… are not people. Four hundred life signs is misleading. I believe there are less than thirty actual humans present on this world. Perhaps none at all. Our systems interpreted multiple and blended life readings and came up with a figure of four hundred. But each one could mean… a dozen… a thousand…'

'A dozen or a thousand what?'

Sejanus crossed to one of the primary cogitators, entered his code and pulled up pict-capture from the combat archives. Sliding with his fingertip, he began to lay the images out across the glass screen, as a man might spread paper pictures on a table.

'Wait, wait, what am I looking at?' asked Horus. 'What is this?'

He touched the screen. A yellow rune highlighted one image and enlarged it, bringing it to the fore. A blur, motion-stabilised. Steel teeth, like human incisors, arranged in a grinding circle like the head of a mining rock-drill. A

snout of cream bone armour. Massive jaw-muscles exteriorised, reinforced with hydraulic baffles, sheathed in the folds of a throat that bellied like a serpent.

'Bio-mech,' replied Sejanus. 'Bio-mechanical constructs. Engineered to kill. Some as small as a man's hand, others larger than a drop-ship.'

'Engineered?'

'Gene-edited. Spliced, reworked from human stock.'

Horus pulled more images to the front and stared at them. Each one showed a new horror, as if he were flicking through a pict-book of a madman's nightmares.

'Everything you see is human,' said Sejanus.

'There's barely anything I recognise as remotely human,' said Horus quietly.

'Quite. But bio-scans are precise. Everything coming at us is genetically human. Woven from this colony's original human stock. Some combine the genes of more than one source individual. Multiple others are worked from a single origin gene-donor. All are reinforced and weaponised with cybernetics.'

'Hence the misleading life scans?'

Sejanus nodded. 'We're facing thousands of individual bio-mech hostiles. Potentially, over a hundred thousand. Every single one of them is capable of killing a fully armed legionary. But they are all derived from the same four hundred human originals.'

He looked at Horus. 'My wolves have given them names, lord. I have tried to discourage it. Cyberzerkers. Biome- cannibals. Misbegots. They are feral horrors. The least of them make the greenskins seem mild. The worst is… there is no sane reason for any of them.'

'Sane reason?'

'I mean, lord… in the sense of design. They're just like nightmares. Nightmares of flesh, made flesh. Some are so clumsy and grotesque they seem to serve no other purpose than to disgust.'

Sejanus summoned up more images. A pallid thing like a starfish, the limbs human arms, a beaked mouth at the centre. A thorned snake as thick as a tree trunk, formed from translucent intestine. Something made entirely of weeping eyes. Here, four thick, human legs bearing a sack that opened in a gaping orifice that was a mouth within a mouth within a mouth.

Glistening things covered in blisters and horns. Pulsing things festooned with barbs. Things made of interlocked hands that cupped drooling mouths and glaring pupils. Things sheathed in fingernail horn, their exposed flanks stippled with coarse black hairs and open sores.

'These are the constructs Fo has made,' said Sejanus.

Horus glanced at him. 'In the Dark Age,' he said, 'before Old Night fell, there was a man called Fo. Basilio Fo. A bio-engineer. A self-proclaimed Worker of Obscenity. The data is very incomplete…'

'It would be,' remarked Sejanus. 'The Age of Technology ended five millennia past.'

Horus nodded. 'The creature called Fo mentioned in the annals was a monster even by the standards of that godless age. Hunted for his blasphemous work, he fled Terra during the stellar exodus. He was presumed lost, long dead.'

He looked at Sejanus. 'But given his gifts and skill-set, it may be he has survived. Endured is perhaps a better word. Sejanus, we may have found the hidden bastion of one of history's foulest creatures.'

The vox-system chimed. Sejanus turned and took the signal, listening carefully.

He looked back at Lupercal.

'Illumination complete,' he said. 'We have compliance. Daerec Terminator squad reports penetration of the enclave's main bunker and the capture of Fo. They're bringing him here. No other humans found. Not whole ones.'

Horus nodded, and clapped Sejanus on the arm.

'Your bleak efforts are rewarded, Hastur.'

Sejanus allowed himself a thin smile.

'I think it was you that turned the tide, lord. Word of your unexpected arrival quickly spread. The Fourth was inspired by your presence. They redoubled their efforts so as not to disappoint you.'

'A coincidence, I'm sure,' replied Horus. 'Since when did the Fourth ever slacken?'

'Perhaps,' said Sejanus. 'But you have an effect. The enemy must have learned of your arrival too, through vox intercept. Their heart was lost to learn a primarch was upon them. Just as our efforts renewed, Daerec reports the biomech misbegots lost a degree of frenzy. Their resistance broke, as if they were, at last, afraid of us.'

'They faltered just as I arrived?' asked Horus.

'As fast as word spread,' said Sejanus.

Horus paused. He picked up his war helm.

'Hastur?'

'My lord?'

'Get your weapon,' he growled. 'They were waiting for me.'

Sejanus began to reply, but his words were lost. The entire west side of the command module ripped out, and hell poured in at them.

The misbegot was the size of three landing ships. It had bored up through rock and soil beneath the Luna Wolves' forward base, breaching the crust of the world as easily as an ocean creature might rise up from the unlit depths and break the surface. Endless rows of grinding teeth had gnawed the ground away. Great loops and ridges of muscle had pulsed to heave the giant thing along its burrow.

It had no form, yet it had all forms. It was a vast bulk, a slab of flesh reinforced with a rib cage that would have made the frame of a generous dwelling hall. Yet it was also a writhing forest of limbs, of clawing hands, of amputee stumps that wedged and stabilised its weight. It was eyes, wide and weeping, clustered like egg sacks. It was mouths, some opening in its centre mass, some lunging forward on whip-spined necks, every gullet specialised and distinct. One to snap, one to bite, one to grind, one to sever, one to grasp and hold as others fed.

It had no symmetry whatsoever. It was a sample of organic nightmares and anatomical shocks fused in one flesh, resembling no creature, terrestrial or xenos.

Yet its one defining horror was that it, and every disparate part of it, was unmistakably human.

And it was fast. Despite its size, it groped and slithered like a charging grox. It demolished the module chamber, shredding reinforced fabric in a blizzard of splinters, rending cogitator stations into scatters of sparks and debris, ripping up deck plates and undermatting like paper.

Staggered backwards by the shockwave of its burst assault, Lupercal and Sejanus braced side by side, unslung their weapons and unleashed streams of bolter fire into this onrushing misbegot. Wounds stippled the face of it, exploding fibres of flesh and muscle, erupting clouds of blood drizzle. Each

gaping injury would have been the kill-wound for any beast of comparable scale.

It did not flinch.

Even with the most curious xenos-form, there was always some defining sense of biology. A common-sense estimation of vital parts, of head or heart, or principal organs.

The misbegot's lack of symmetry made such determinations impossible.

'With me,' said Horus.

They fell back through a junction hall into the adjoining module, reloading as they ran. Alarms were already screeching, triggered by seismic tremblers, perimeter auspex and integrity monitors. The klaxons were drowned out by the grinding roar of the horror as it pulverised the modular compartments to get at them.

Ahead, Horus saw men rallying to meet the attack: the startled fleet officers who manned the forward base, army auxiliaries, tactical staff, and a few Luna Wolves charged with station defence.

'Legiones Astartes, at my side!' Horus yelled. 'The rest, fall back!'

Only the armoured would stand a chance. The rest would die in seconds. Some were already spluttering as the corrosive air of Valich Tarn flooded the compromised habitat.

Yet they hesitated, for it was Lupercal, death opening its door at his heels, and they had pledged their lives and come to the stars to stand at his side.

'I command it! Save yourselves now!' Horus cried.

They obeyed, reluctant. The Luna Wolves, six of them, made a line with Horus and the Fourth's captain. The misbegot bore down, half submerged in the ground, sliding through flooring and rock alike, humped spine visible, flinging deck plates aside in its wake. The walls perished. The gale entered. Eight bolters began to fire, spattering meat and swirling the air with blood-smoke.

It reached them, unstopped, unslowed. Some buried, forward part of it tore up through the decking and dragged a Luna Wolf down, churning tooth-drills shredding his legs and lower torso.

'My lord!' Sejanus howled.

The misbegot reared up, its titanic form supported by straining appendages and its gnarled trans-skeletal frame.

Horus stood his ground. His warblade gleamed in his armoured fist.

'Go back to hell,' he whispered.

'You slew it?' asked Fo.

Horus sat down facing him in the stark cell-block chamber. He was drenched in blood, and the chest and fore-guards of his plate were gouged and stripped back to bare metal. He made no answer at first. Blood dripped off him onto the deck. A trail of little blood pools led back to the hatch.

'It was reluctant to die,' said Horus. 'I dismantled your work until I found the one part it could not persist without.'

Fo nodded. He was small and bird-like, his forehead broad, his eyes bright. He perched rather than sat, hunched in his simple black robes.

'You were waiting for me,' said Horus.

Fo shrugged.

'I knew you would come one day, and when you did, I would not win. I resolved to make my stand count for something. If not defeat the enemy, then eliminate the greatest of its party. Its leader.'

'You knew I would come?' asked Horus.

Fo nodded.

'Mm-hmm. You or something like you. One day. Eventually. It's been a long time, but it was inevitable. Terra endures.'

'You left there a long time ago.'

'My art was not appreciated.'

'I have seen it first-hand. That does not surprise me. Abominations, Fo.'

'Abominations?' Fo smiled, and showed small and perfect teeth. 'I see tastes have not changed.'

He sat back.

'I have been monitoring your activity since you arrived in this zone twenty months ago,' he said. 'Through my listening stations and watch-networks, I have observed your dealings with local cultures. Your message. Your offer of embrace. I knew you would knock on my door before long.'

'And you were prepared,' said Horus. 'Afraid, for you thought we would judge you as poorly as the people of Terra once did.'

Fo frowned.

'No, you are mistaken,' he replied. 'You think I left Terra because I was driven out? Shunned? Demonised? No, no. All artists and innovators are misunderstood.'

'Then why?'

'Because I saw the start of his rise,' said Fo. 'Even then, early days, but I could see what he would become. Your father, I mean. I knew what future awaited a man who dreamed the dreams he did. Though it took decades or centuries or longer, I knew he would not be denied. I wanted no part of that. I wanted to be as far away as possible.'

'Why?' asked Horus.

'His dream is unthinkable, yet he has the power to make it real. I see he has begun to now. You… you have reached the stars.'

'Yes, bearing his message. His hope to—'

'Hope?' Fo shook his head sadly. 'Yes. Naturally, he would tell his children that. He always made things sound so optimistic. A glorious and endless future. But, of course, you wouldn't understand.'

'I don't,' said Horus, rising. 'You are a maker of abominations. A creator of the most obscene things I have ever beheld. I presume a mind as transgressive as yours would see only horror in the splendour of his ambition. And fear the justice he would mete upon you for your crimes against the human form.'

'Oh god, no!' cried Fo in surprise. He hesitated. 'Do they still speak of god on Terra? Do they still believe? I suppose not. They wouldn't have to now. Anyway, you're wrong. I don't fear his justice. You say I have made abominations? Look what *he* has made.'

'What do you mean?' asked Horus.

'I mean you. You and beings like you. You think I've made monsters? In my wildest deliriums I could not have designed monsters like you. I practise simple and ingenious arts of genetics and anatomy. I tinker and edit, to make puzzles and delights and curious wonders, things to make us think, and ponder the nature of our being and our place in the scheme of life.'

He looked up at Horus.

'I do not make things that will burn the galaxy down. I do not make things that will doom our species and lead it into an endless frenzy of war. You are the most abominable thing I have ever seen. Grotesque. Sickening. Misbegotten. I could not hope to kill you all, but to abort just one before it reached potential… well, that would have been some solace.'

Fo got up, and brushed down his clothes.

'I'd like to die now,' he said. 'I don't want to live in a cosmos where things

like you are loose.'

'What will you do?' asked Hastur Sejanus.

'We'll purge this place. Let nothing of Fo's work remain. And quickly, Hastur. The fleet awaits.'

'Will you execute him as he asks?'

Horus shook his head.

'For his crimes against the species, I should, I suppose,' he replied. 'But I will place him on a ship and bring him to meet our father. Fo is mad, but I dearly wish he could glimpse the honest and whole truth once before his life ends.'

'You want his compliance?'

'His ideas are so wrong, Hastur. This is an enlightened age and we are the messengers of hope. A hope that our kind has lacked through all the ages past until this era. I want this man to know his error, and appreciate the truth. It's the least I can do for him.'

'You are too merciful,' said Sejanus.

'If that is my only flaw, I am glad of it,' said Horus. 'His notions unsettled me. How could any man misunderstand the glory of our enterprise so completely? How could any man fear the likes of me?'

Years later, long after the Triumph of Ullanor, and the great bloodshed of the Heresy, and the darkness of the Fall that ended it, men forgot the hope they had once shared.

On ancient Terra, in those final days of the Fall, Basilio Fo heard the thunder approaching through the stout walls of his oubliette cell in the depths of the Imperial Palace.

And, despite the madness that had by then consumed him, he knew he had been right, all along, not to submit to hope.

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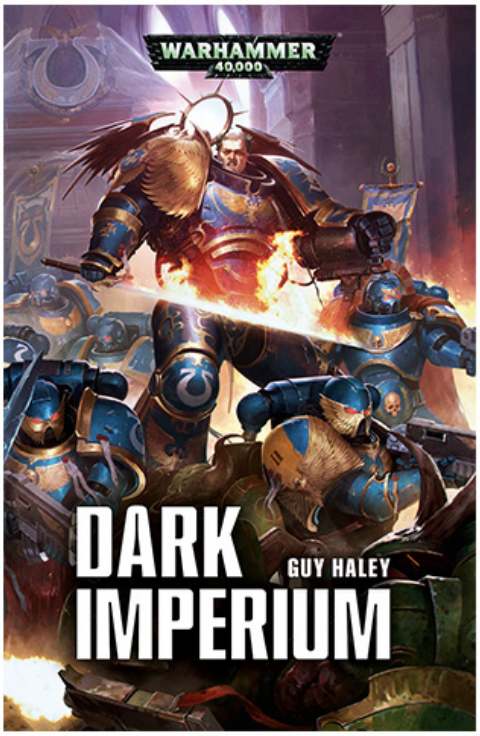

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